JAYSON TATUM ★ DAMIAN LILLARD ★ LAS VEGAS ACES ★ VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

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SHAI. JALEN.
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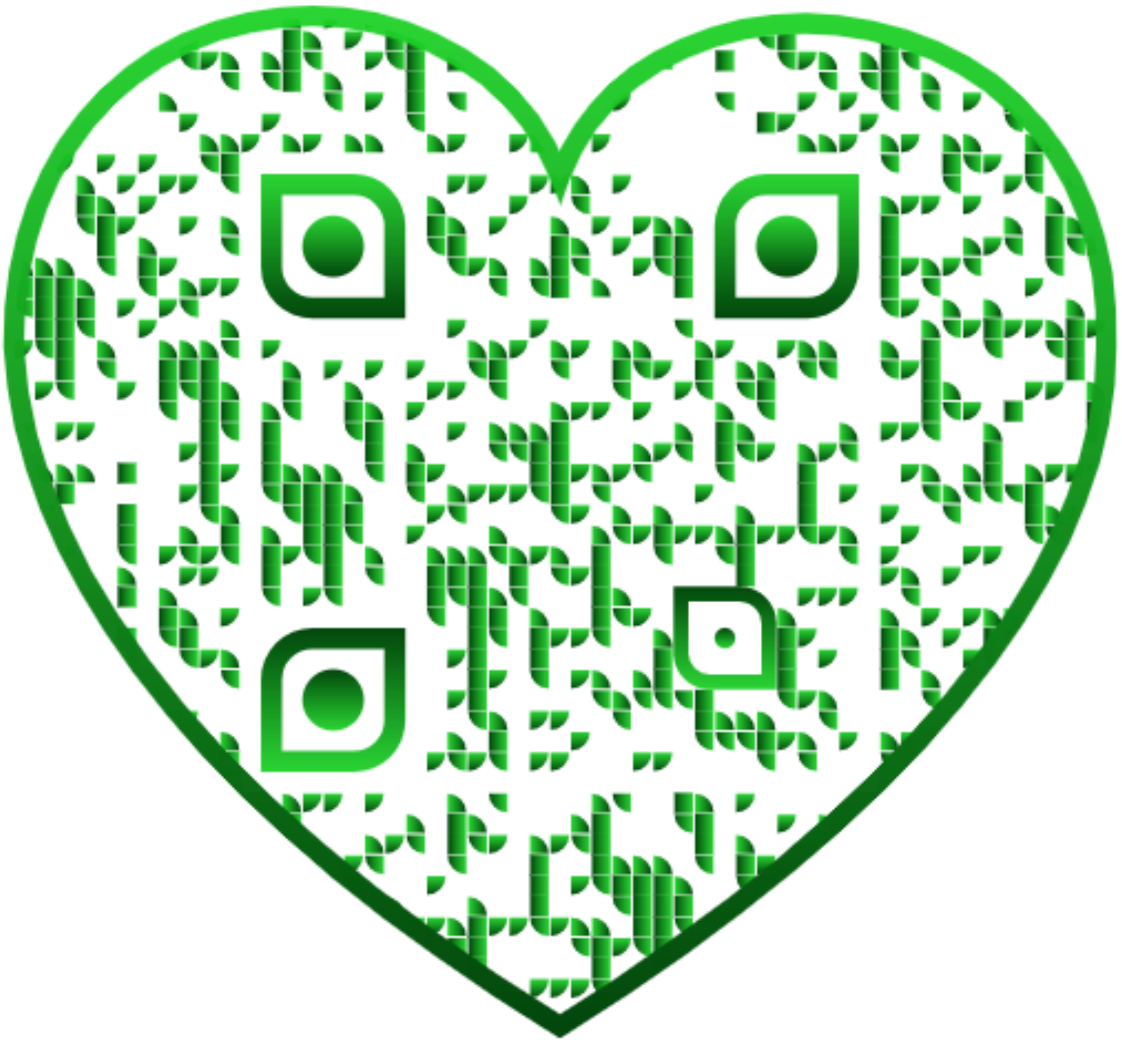
RETURN OF THE REAL



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#247 DECEMBER/JANUARY 2024

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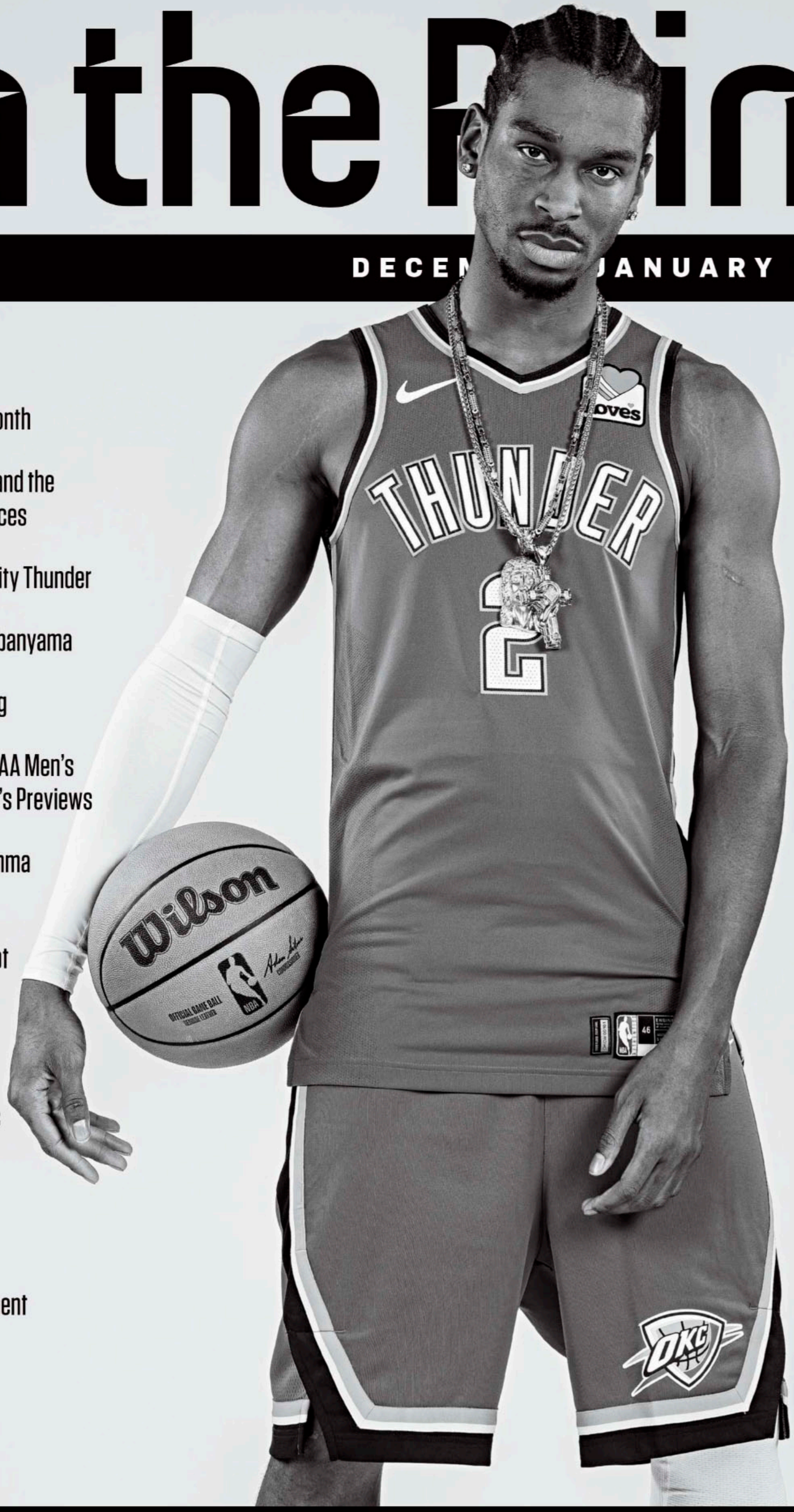

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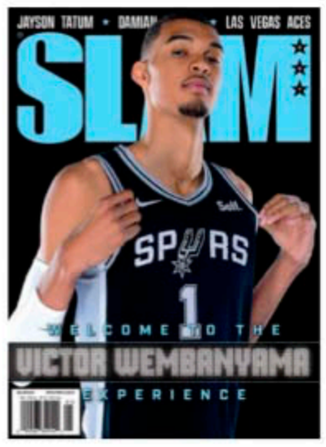

The Sixth Man

NO DENYING THIS: WE'VE got four banger covers this issue. Let's give a quick rundown.

With the NBA season tipping off, we've got two fun ones: the OKC Thunder starting 5 and rookie sensation Victor Wembanyama. The OKC joint in particular seems to have really tapped into an excitement fans have for this Thunder group, which has been amazing to see. There's just *something* about them—on the court, they've got all elements of both sides of the floor covered (minus, I guess, brute-force interior defense, though Chet will get there), and now they just need to grow and improve as a unit. Off the court they're very simply five cool-as-hell young dudes whose outfits are consistently featured on LeagueFits and whose personalities shine through in Instagram captions. What's not to love?

And then Wembanyama...I mean, what's left to say? He's so fun, his potential is insane, and it's all going to get better from here. Maybe, like, better to a degree we've never seen before. I think San Antonio native and one of my favorite writers Shea Serrano summed it up pretty well on page 38. Take his words for it, not mine.

We've also got our annual WNBA Champs cover, featuring Las Vegas Aces star A'ja Wilson rocking black Air Force 1s, a pair of sneakers that makes a statement louder than one of our cover lines ever could. But damn if we didn't try to compete. My real SLAM heads will think of the LeBron "Hi Haters!" cover, which is the exact vibe we were aiming for. Plus, A'ja's teammate Sydney Colson wrote the cover story! A dope moment all around.

Lastly, we've got a new one: The first-ever college commitment made on the cover of SLAM. Sure, there's been fake covers made by college prospects posted on social media accounts by players declaring their university intentions, and we don't mind those—we appreciate the love, actually—but this is a little different. No. 1 player in the country Cooper Flagg told the world he was going to be attending Duke University by debuting an actual magazine cover wearing the jersey of his school of choice. That's special.

This is our last base issue of SLAM for the calendar year, so hopefully these covers and this issue hold you over until 2024. (We'll have a couple special issues before we hit January; stay locked in with our social channels and slamgoods.com to cop those.) And come next year we'll be celebrating SLAM's 30th Anniversary, which I'm very excited for. Thirty years of SLAM! Can't wait until you see what we've got planned.

Peace,

Adam Figman

OFF THE BENCH

Shea Serrano wrote this month's cover story on Spurs rookie Victor Wembanyama. He's also written four (!) *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Basketball (And Other Things)* and *Hip-Hop (And Other Things)*. The San Antonio native has been reading SLAM for a quarter century and in his own words, "can't believe I got to write a cover story for it." Check out his new podcast, *Six Trophies*, now.

LARAMIE SERRANO

2023 VOL.30 NO.6

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Trash Talk

Looks like a Cash Money album from back in the day and I dig it.
mfaulkstunes via Instagram

I think "The Stars Align" is the perfect line bc there's something magical happening at Barclays. Their energy is insane!! LET'S GOOOOOO LIBBBBB!!! Bring it homeeee!!!
Chimppk via YouTube

I just love seeing these women be highlighted like they're supposed to. @wslam @SLAMonline covers embracing WHoops!
kdotlew3H via Twitter

Let's go LIBERTY! You are truly a No. 1 seed. You guys have come a long way and it shows how hard work and dedication pays off at the end. New York Liberty fan for life.
Tonybyrd2759 via YouTube

I understand that she's trying to downplay it, but, they kinda are a super team. Bringing in Stewie, Jones & Vandersloot were all key acquisitions this past off-season.
mallbeendifferent via Instagram

I hope the 🗽 take us to the promise land after 26 years. 😊
Aloysiusfee1687 via YouTube

"We are hard to beat" PERIOD!!! 🗽💅🏾
k.neyoutyyy via Instagram

Has Betnijah ever taken a bad photo?
kristenlpittman_ via Instagram

Sloot is such a Beast💯💯🙌🏾🙌🏾 Love you SLOOOOOOOOT🗽🗽🗽🗽🗽🗽
Mul358 via Twitter

Lookin' like a Cash Money album! I'm hoping to see some big things from [the Liberty] this offseason!! Holding NY down!
nayvino via Instagram

Streets say deserved.
primeluka_ via Twitter

Face of L.A.
wadeburner35 via Twitter

HIM!!!
batumhoop via Twitter

Paul George must have gotten a taste of that 'bully sh-t' Kool-Aid! I'm ready to see what he's got in store this season! 😂
ray2kay via Twitter

PG hated for not doing the norm. Clip way let's get it.
albertogonzalez9780 via YouTube

I really hope he can just stay healthy. PG is one of the most talented players of this generation, easy all-defensive player 28/5/5 when he's out there.
lexieeeebabyyy via Instagram

Hope to see him in top form this season! PG13 for MVP 👀
Scottietipin via Twitter

Hope he stays healthy man, def got one of the smoothest games in the League.
trveash via Instagram

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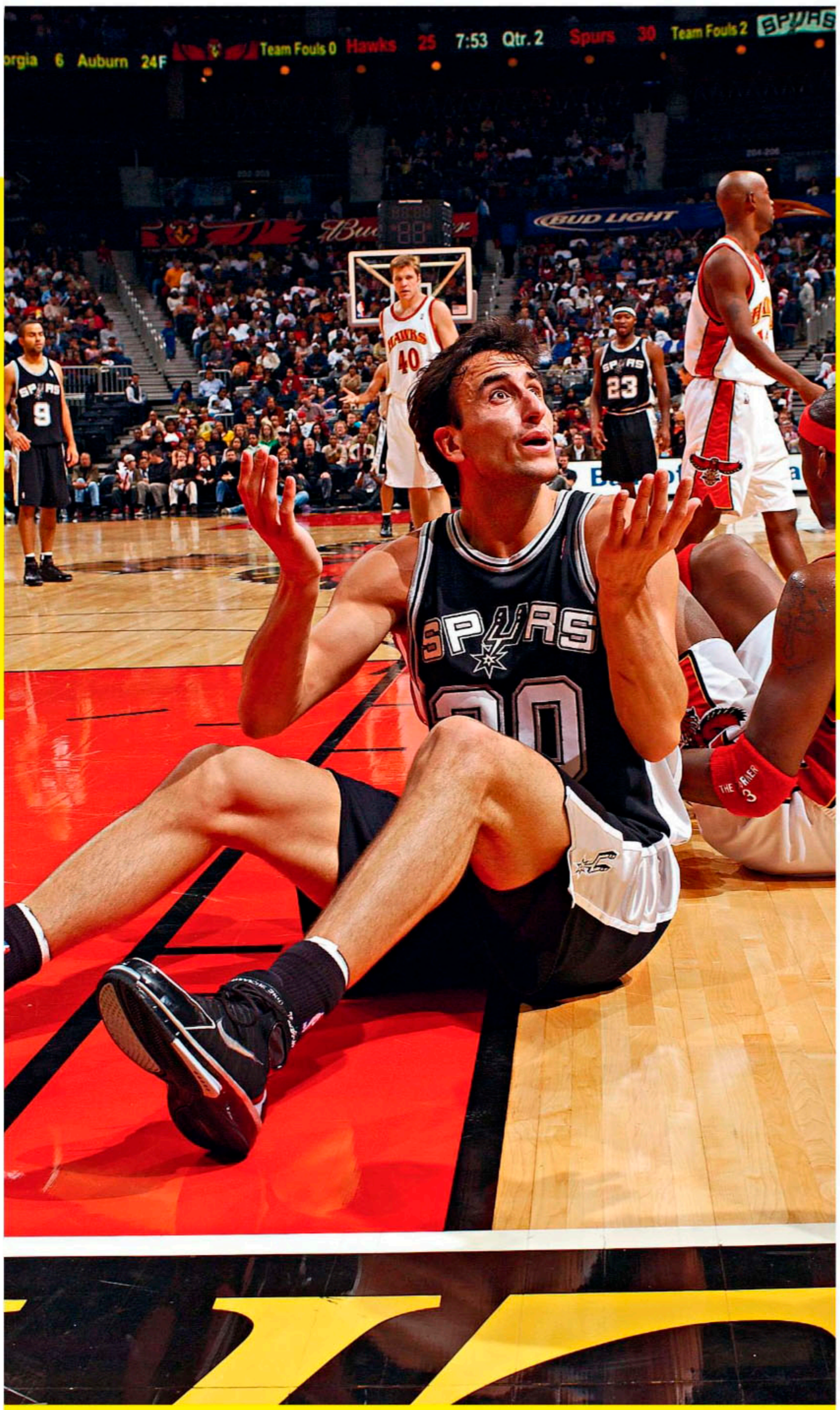

THE OPENING TIP

ALWAYS BY RICK TELANDER

WHEN YOU see a dude go flying backward like he's been hit by a truck, when all he got was bumped lightly, that, my friends, is a flop. And it's a flop when you grab your face and fall to the floor in agony, like you caught a shovel to the nose, when all you got was a brush to the shoulder from a dribbler going past you.

The NBA has decided that its players have gotten so good at acting out fake collisions and trips and shoves and performing better tumbles than Simone Biles that it has cracked down this season on the banana-peel acting. The penalty for flopping is now a free throw for the other team and a non-unsportsmanlike technical foul on the flopper. It's interest-

NOYZ » Four incredible covers = a lot of people to thank for helping make them happen. Matt and the OKC Thunder PR squad...Jordan and the Spurs PR squad...Victor's team at Comsport... Kelly Flagg for being amazing to work with on all things Cooper...The Las Vegas Aces, A'ja's team at Klutch and Sydney's team at LIFT for help on the A'ja cover and Sydney's great cover story...

ing in that the free throw can be shot not right when the flop occurs but at the next "neutral opportunity," as the League explains. So play continues and the flopper can be outraged (perhaps even doing a tad more acting here) when there's a break and the ref informs him that he flopped back there and has to deal with it.

Though complicated—try figuring out honest vector forces when two large men collide—it's good the League is doing this. We can't have, say, hordes of Manu Ginobili-imitators working the games like whiplash experts. True, since 2012, there have been fines for excessive flopping, but the judgements only came after game review, with nothing done during actual play. Now your Chris Pauls and James Hardens and Kristaps Porzingises must be wary not only of fines but of giving away points when they do a circus routine.

The point of flopping, of course, is to get a foul or turnover called on the other team even when it isn't deserved. Taking a legit charge helps your team. So does getting fouled. And those things can be painful. But seeing a hulking power forward get launched backward by a much smaller guard is chicanery at its finest.

Folks blame the ever-villain and former Pistons "Bad Boy" Bill Laimbeer for mainlining the flop into the NBA. And I guess that's so. Laimbeer is blamed for so much, anyhow, that, well, why not lay one more deed on him? Yet the animated, rubber-faced, often hilarious big man Vlade Divac gets my vote for making the flop a truly embedded part of the landscape. A pet rabbit could set the 7-1, 260-pound Divac flying. Being from Serbia, Vlade surely had a lightbulb go off in his brain as a youth from watching Euro soccer, in which flopping is pretty much like breathing.

Regardless, the flopping police are now out there, dressed in stripes, and they're coming for you, NBA stars.

Acting school, anyone?

PREVIOUS: SCOTT CUNNINGHAM; THIS PAGE FROM TOP: NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/BOTH NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; DAVID BREWSTER/STAR TRIBUNE VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: REY DEL RIO/GETTY IMAGES

HIGHEST IN THE ROOM

Yup, he's back. Unstoppable big man **Zach Edey** decided to return to Purdue to chase a national title so...good luck to everyone else.

FOR THE SECOND YEAR in a row—after Kentucky's Oscar Tshiebwe last year—the reigning men's basketball national player of the year will return to college instead of going pro. Zach Edey, the 7-4 big fella by way of Canada, is set for one final season with the Purdue Boilermakers, who are ranked third in the AP Top 25 preseason poll. Edey was named a unanimous AP preseason All-American.

While a repeat sweep of all the national player of the year awards would be nice, Edey's decision to come back was about something much bigger than individual accolades. "It was coming back and playing with a team that really loves me, teammates that I love, a coaching staff that loves me, university that loves me and a fan base that loves me," says Edey. "And then to be able to compete for every championship that there is in the country, that's a pretty tough deal to turn down."

After falling on the wrong side of a Cinderella story last year and losing to No. 16 Fairleigh Dickinson in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, Purdue has returned most of its core. The revenge tour starts and ends with the squad's best player: Edey. "I know who I am, I know what I bring, I know what I do. I'm focused on putting up numbers in the win column," he says. "I'm not too worried about trying to prove myself to people, that could get dangerous."—***Curtis Rowser III***

NOYZ » and the whole team both here at SLAM and a slew of freelancers that helped us make it all happen...Sydney Colson: First active pro hooper to write a SLAM cover story (that's not about themself)? We could be forgetting one, but we think so...There's a dope basketball art gallery that now lives right below the SLAM office in Long Island City and is open to the public. (Plus, all the

BIG SHOT

San Diego State guard **Lamont Butler** hit one of the craziest shots in college basketball history last year, sending his squad to the NCAA championship game for the first time in program history. This season, he's ready to run it back.

FROM LEFT: GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE SCHWABEROW/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY

THE SECRET BEHIND the biggest shot in all of college basketball last season has to do with numbers. While many know of San Diego State star guard Lamont Butler's incredible buzzer beater against Florida Atlantic to send the Aztecs to the NCAA men's basketball championship game for the first time in program history (they eventually lost to UConn), it wasn't Butler's first time hitting a clutch shot from deep—he did it against New Mexico earlier in the season.

But back to the numbers. The California native has been counting down "3, 2, 1 for the championship..." in his head since his days shooting around in his driveway at home. He attended the same high school—Riverside Poly High—as legendary NBA shooter Reggie Miller, and grew up watching game winners during March Madness. His favorite, as he told ESPN, is Villanova forward Kris Jenkins' shot in 2016 to defeat North Carolina for the 'chip.

"To be in that moment, it was actually more surreal than you know, it was better than what I dreamed of," Butler told @SLAMUniversity, just a few days before the start of the 2023-24 season. He's always been pretty into mind games, which is something he admits a lot of people might not know about him. Butler's always solving Rubik's Cubes (his fastest time is 44 seconds) as well as puzzles and riddles. He also plays Contexto and Wordle "pretty much every day."

"I feel like my IQ and [the brain games] kind of help me on the court," he says. "I'm always thinking about what's next or different outcomes and trying to stay creative."

Along with his quick thinking, all of the hours and reps he's put into his shooting in the offseason play a major factor. His three-point shooting was his primary focus this past offseason as he went through the pre-NBA Draft process. This season, he says he's focused entirely on the team and getting it back to the national championship stage. As for his individual goals, he wants to win national Defensive Player of the Year, too. All the while, Butler has been dealing with his newfound stardom and getting recognized around San Diego with congratulations from people and requests for photos and autographs.

"I see the shot all the time," he says. "People [are] always posting it. It's an amazing moment [and] one of the best moments of my life."

—Deyscha Smith

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NOYZ » art is for sale!) Come check it out at 43-42 12th St., Queens, NY...Our 30th Anniversary is coming up, and without spoiling anything, we'll give you a cliché: Big things coming....Not gonna lie, the in-season tournament is pretty confusing, but the semis and finals should be fun. BUT...it clearly hasn't solved players resting–so, for the love of everything, can we please shave a few

BRICK BY BRICK

When he isn't patrolling the paint for the Pacers, you can find big man **Myles Turner** in his happy place, creating LEGO masterpieces.

LESS THAN 24 HOURS after dropping 20 points, 12 boards and 2 blocks against the Cavs in the Pacers' second game of the regular season, Myles Turner is at his Indianapolis home piecing together the LEGO Star Wars AT-AT Walker.

The two-time blocks champion is a self-proclaimed LEGO brick connoisseur. If you've seen his social media, you know that might be an understatement. Throughout the season, Turner uses the room he's sitting in on this late October day as a respite from the world and a place of peace for him and his bricks.

"It's damn near a form of meditation," Turner says. "I can have a great game, or I can have a bad game, but once I come in here, once I'm in my space, I just tune everything out. I'm sitting here and I just

COURTESY OF MYLES TURNER

build. It's a good little mental reset for me because no one's bothering me. I'm literally sitting here, in my own world, doing my thing."

Currently, Turner is building the Harry Potter Hogwarts Castle (6,020 pieces) and R2D2 (2,314). His home in Austin, TX, is the headquarters of his growing LEGO City collection, alongside 13 different ships. The base of his staircase bears a life-size version of himself as Darth Vader, comprised of over 100,000 pieces.

"The biggest thing for me in this LEGO thing is, it's not gimmicky. This is actually something I love and I'm passionate about," Turner says. "The ingenuity that goes behind all of it, the imagination that people have and the different lanes and different worlds that you can open up stepping into this space is unreal."

—Jared Ebanks

NOYZ » games off the regular season and get rid of back-to-backs entirely? Will only help a little, but at least there'll really be no excuse...We've been quiet on the podcast front, that ends soon... Reminder! SLAM writers/forever SLAM Fam Russ Bengtson, Scoop Jackson and Alex Squadron all have amazing books out. Go get 'em—they make elite holiday gifts...RIP Bobby Knight...Tasha Butts...

HBCU SPOTLIGHT

PIRATES' TREASURE

Over the past five years, **Hampton University** has moved conferences twice. Now in the competitive Colonial Athletic Association, the Pirates are ready to make some noise.

Jordan Nesbitt

IT'S BEEN NINE YEARS, AND there's still something that doesn't sit right with Maryland traveling to Iowa on a Wednesday night for a Big Ten matchup, bypassing longtime ACC rivals like Duke, North Carolina and Virginia. But conference realignment hasn't only impacted the high majors; it's had a ripple effect on some of the most historic HBCU conferences and the respective programs that make up these conferences. Case and point: Hampton University.

After 22 years, Hampton announced that it was leaving the MEAC in 2017. In the six years since, Hampton has moved conferences twice, first to the Big South and then to the Colonial Athletic Association (CAA) last year—each move marking a significant uptick in competition.

"I hate to say it, but the first year [in the CAA] was a rude awakening," says Hampton head coach Edward Joyner Jr, who's been with the program since 2006. "But it was also an exciting new endeavor that we were willing and ready to jump into. Going into our second year, we're raising the bar for ourselves with what we're recruiting and what we're trying to do to put ourselves in position. We're capable of winning some ball games and trying to play with the elite in the conference."

Despite no longer being in the MEAC, Coach Joyner has made it a point for his program not to forget the HBCU community it's a part of. He intends to sustain the rivalries deeply rooted in the fabric of Hampton basketball, like those with Howard and crosstown rivals Norfolk State. "We've tried to keep our traditional rivals," Joyner says, "so we don't lose the uniqueness of us being an HBCU even though we left the conference."

For the upcoming 2023-24 campaign, Hampton was voted to finish 13th out of 14 in the CAA preseason rankings. But Coach Joyner says he relishes being overlooked and proving naysayers wrong. "When you say chip on your shoulder—that shit ain't no chip, it's a boulder," he says emphatically. "Right now, we're playing for something bigger than us. We're in a moment where [HBCUs] are being looked at through us. That's what we preach every day. Our pressure is a different pressure, but if you don't want that pressure, don't come. Why not try to become the standard?"

—Curtis Rowser III

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES (2); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

LEVELS TO THIS

A recent exhibit by photographer **Dominique Oliveto** captures the intersection of basketball, art and fashion through compelling portraits.

"JUST AS clothes have layers, so do people and so does art."

Dominique Oliveto, a creator, photographer and artist based out of Los Angeles, knows a thing or two about the game and high-fashion. She's photographed players in the WNBA and NBA, including three-time champ Chelsea Gray and Celtics superstar Jaylen Brown and has also been featured in *Vogue*. Her latest work includes a captivating new exhibit, "Layers v1," which explores the ways in which athletes express their creativity off the court.

Showcased at the Container Yard's Anderson Exhibition space in October, and curated by exhibition producer Jim Carter, the exhibit featured intimate black and white portraits and mixed media contact sheets of WNBA champion Essence Carson and G League standout London Johnson. Rather than simply capturing both subjects in their jerseys or on the hardwood, Oliveto centers them on seamless backdrops rocking hella stylish pieces, jewelry and shades. The portraits of Carson, specifically, resemble prints out of a high-fashion editorial or stills from a music video. It's a deliberate choice on Oliveto's part to emphasize that while, yes, Carson is an athlete, there are layers to her identity and expression, and she has interests outside of what she does.

As Oliveto puts it, "['Layers v1'] tells a story of myself and the athletes that I've captured. The worlds of fashion and basketball have taken my work globally, all of which is represented in this exhibition. My central theme expands beyond duality and encourages people to think beyond the surface."

To learn more about the exhibit and Oliveto's work, visit legacywmedia.com.

—Deyscha Smith

STILL BALLIN'

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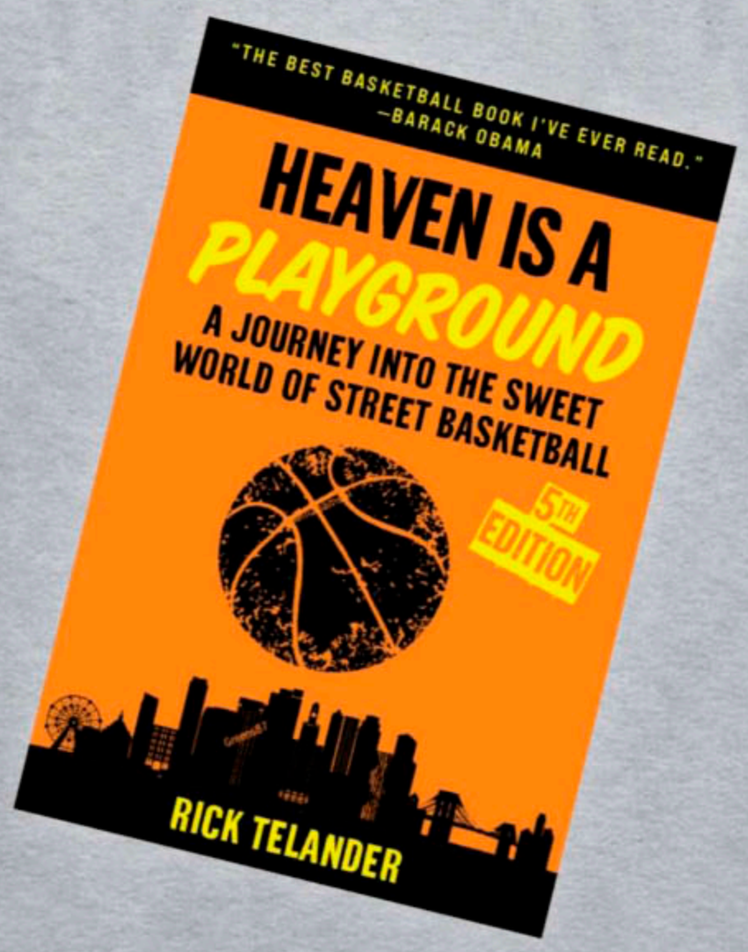

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HEAVEN IS A PLAYGROUND

MELISSA MAJCHRZAK/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

It took a little while for Malik Monk to find his place in the NBA. Drafted 11th overall by Charlotte in 2017, he started just one game for the Hornets in four seasons—his readily apparent explosiveness relegated to the bench on a team that topped out at 39 wins and never made the playoffs. He spent a season with the Lakers—proving he could play bigger minutes, on a contender no less—before landing with the Kings.

Monk joined former Kentucky teammate De'Aaron Fox in Sacramento and helped light the beam in the playoffs. This year? It might just be the start, but he's already got the finishing down.—**RUSS BENGTSON**

SLAM ADAMONTH

MALIK MONK ON KRIS DUNN

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SALT LAKE CITY, UT

ROYAL FLUSH

THE **LAS VEGAS ACES** HAVE DONE IT AGAIN. FOLLOWING A **RECORD-SETTING REGULAR SEASON**, THE **DEFENDING CHAMPS** ROLLED THROUGH ALL OF THEIR COMPETITION EN ROUTE TO **A SECOND RING IN TWO SEASONS**. HERE, **TWO-TIME WNBA CHAMPION SYDNEY COLSON** REFLECTS ON WHAT THIS TITLE REPRESENTS FOR THE CITY, HER TEAMMATE A'JA WILSON'S LEGACY, HER OWN SELF-TRANSFORMATION AND **THE TEAM'S PLACE IN HISTORY**.

WORDS **SYDNEY COLSON**

2023 WNBA CHAMPIONS
LAS ACES
BACK 2 BACK
Michelob
ULTRA
2023 WNBA NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION CHAMPIONS
2023
WNBA FINALS
MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

THE YEAR I JOINED THE Aces was the first time I met A'ja Wilson. Well, technically I met her during training camp in 2018, but I officially joined the team in 2019, so we'll count that.

I'd obviously watched her play in college at South Carolina, and I remember thinking, *OK, this is their franchise player,* but I also wanted to see what she'd do at this level. Looking back, and just seeing the growth that she's made over the years, how vocal of a leader she is and how her game has changed...the way she's branded herself and markets herself, it's so cool to see.

As I write this now, on the day of the championship parade, it brings me back to that moment. I still remember when I had the phone call with Becky Hammon, which was the first time in my career that I was on the phone with a coach and our GM—usually when you're getting training camp contracts or you're not a guaranteed player, people don't just make calls. She was talking about the culture of the program and how they saw me impacting the team and fitting in the locker room. It was amazing to hear that from her.

One thing that I can't stress enough is that, as a team, we all genuinely enjoy one another's company. There are times where you feel like, *Alright, I need to not see y'all for a couple of days*, but that's what regular friends do when you need to recharge and be by yourself. But when we're around each other, it's easy for stuff to flow because it's not forced. Our relationships are as genuine on camera as they are off, and I think that's hard for a lot of people to grapple with because maybe that's not how they are in their real lives. Or you're very wary of joy. Seeing too much joy, you don't believe that it's real, which is sad. But it is real. I feel bad for the people who always have something negative to say when we're genuinely having fun. That's hard for them to fathom, and I get it. You don't see a lot of teams behave like us in professional sports.

I saw someone say that there's never been a team more entertaining than us since the 2016 Cavs. That's interesting, but I think a lot of times, too, in women's pro sports, women will show their personality more than guys. There's some things guys are not going to do in a group because of fear of not being cool enough. But we don't care. We're going to do stuff that's cool, stuff that's corny, whatever.

We're just enjoying life, and the quicker people can get hip to that and accept that it's the truth, I think the easier it'll be for them to like and appreciate us. But also, if you don't want to, that's fine, too. We're not losing no sleep.

A'ja embodies that. She just gets it on and off the court. She knows what has to be done and I love how she's unapologetically Black. Ain't no code switching. You are getting A'ja. Her book is coming out, *Dear Black Girls*, and I know that the reception for that is going to be crazy. Once it's out and people are getting their books, they're going to love to hear her story. I don't even know the full story, so I can't wait to read it, too.

Here's a funny thing you might not know about her off the court, though: she's actually the type of person that, even if they can't make the function, she'll still want an invite. Let me clarify. Before we went out to bingo as a team, Kiah Stokes and Alysha Clark had recommended going and I brought my girlfriend there first a day or two before we went as a team. I was on Instagram Live when A'ja hit me on some, "Thanks for the invite." I'm like, *Girl, you don't be going places when we invite you sometimes so I'm not gonna*...She's that type of person. But then we all decided to go, and it was a vibe.

As for the wigs, I can explain. We really wanted to do them throughout the season with our tunnel fits, but then we lost a game and we were all like, *Scratch that, we're not wearing it. We don't want to be doing stuff and look like we're not taking the game seriously.* Once the season was done, though, we decided to go play bingo and wear them. As a team, we really do the same stuff you'd do with friends: the movies, going to somebody's apartment, playing games on the road in each other's rooms, go get dinner, do this or that.

Our team already had a sense of togetherness last year, and considering a majority of our team returned this season, it was easy to just pick up where we left off. I think this is what makes our team so special: we can just let it flow and remain unbothered about anything. We just joke with each other—we're fake mean like we're siblings or cousins that you grew up with. We have that best friend energy, like, *I love you. I wouldn't do this with just anybody*. Honestly, joining this team reinvigorated me in a way that made me more appreciative of every moment, especially this year. When the playoffs started, I told myself that if this

OPENING SPREAD: DAVID DOW/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; PREVIOUS SPREAD: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; THIS SPREAD, TOP LEFT: BRIAN BABINEAU; RIGHT: MIKE LAWRENCE/BOTH NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

is the last year, make sure that you're fully present for every practice, every film session, every bus ride when we're joking around together. Make sure that you are enjoying the hell out of every single moment on this run.

I think there was also that added element of people not thinking that we were going to run it back once Chelsea Gray and Kiah went down during the Finals. I remember Coach Becky and the assistants kept saying that it's so much harder to do it the second time. You got to be that much more locked in and focused, because while you have the benefit of having done it, you have that added oomph that people are going to bring when they play you. But A'ja, her confidence is unwavering. She keeps her people around her, and when you've got people who love and care about you, people who at the end of the day, no matter if there are people who don't even know you for real or are doubting you, these things really don't matter. She's got her parents, siblings and loved ones around her. She's not concerned about this internet stuff. She's like, *This stuff is for fun, it's for play and a lot of y'all take it to the head.* But if we were to get rid of social media and media today, she knows she's got her people who care about her. It's like, *I don't need y'all to affirm me in any kind of way.*

We saw that throughout the playoffs, too. Chicago, they were feisty. They got Kahleah Copper, Courtney Williams, Izzy Harrison will be back in the future. They got people who are gonna talk, but I know they gotta be a fun team because I know some of the players individually. As for Dallas, they're huge. They're like The Monstars: they got players who can score at all three levels, they got good guards, posts, they'll play fast and rebound the ball really well. Coach T [Latricia Trammell] did a good job with them this year.

As for New York, they're talented. They're a really, really, really good team, and I think our matchup was really great for the game and for the W. When you think about sports, you want to see the rivalries, right? The highlights, the stars are going to be out at the game, viewership will be high. That's what you want to see for many teams around the League and hopefully we're on the way to getting into that.

It wasn't until after Game 4 in the Finals, as the media was conducting interviews, that I thought about saying something about being disrespected. It's

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LAS VEGAS
ACES

not even that I had to get it off my chest, because I'm not a trash-talking person. I didn't say anything throughout the whole game, but once I stood on that podium, I definitely let my intrusive thoughts win. If you disrespect me publicly, I'm gonna disrespect you publicly.

While I may have not played a lot of minutes in the League throughout the course of my career, I'm still here. Fortunately, teams and coaches still see my value, but even if they hadn't, I was going to always be good in life because God enables me to see my value. I lowkey get emotional talking about it because I'm like, *He will put things in your life and people in your path.* Even when I think about how my faith has grown from when I got to the League to where I am now, I'm a transformed person. I want to do something to make God proud, to make my family proud, to make myself proud.

This is one of those moments. It's taken me a couple of days to process everything; I was just telling Alysha about it, that it still doesn't feel real. I think partially because it's really, really hard to go back to back and, as we saw, it hadn't been done in 20 years. I think it just hadn't set in for us. Like, dang, we did it. We're really going to get to celebrate another one again.

It was dope last year to be the first pro team to win one here in Las Vegas—obviously the Vegas Knights, shout out to them. They won the Stanley Cup. Hopefully they repeat, too. That'd be awesome. It just feels cool to be in a city where that wasn't what it was known for, but hopefully people are coming into Vegas now not just to go to the Strip, but because they want to come see us play.

To the fans: I speak for all of us in saying that we appreciate the support so much. It's amazing to be able to go out there and feel how electrifying the arena is and how you love our team and appreciate us being role models to your children. When you stop us to sign autographs and take pictures, that makes us feel cool. It makes us feel supported and appreciated. You all are the best fans in the League.

We're truly blessed. **S**

FROM LEFT: JEFF BOTTARI; MIKE LAWRENCE/ BOTH NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE SECRET RECIPE

A FACT: AS OF THIS WRITING, THE COOLEST TEAM IN THE NBA PLAYS IN OKLAHOMA. AND THAT TEAM'S FIVE STARS—SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER, LU DORT, JOSH GIDDEY, JALEN WILLIAMS AND CHET HOLMGREN—ARE BOUND TOGETHER IN A WAY THAT FEELS A LITTLE MORE SPECIAL THAN MOST NBA STARTING FIVES. THE '23-24 OKC THUNDER HAVE THE SAUCE. HERE, THEY EXPLAIN HOW THEY GOT IT.

WORDS MAX RESETAR | PORTRAITS MARCUS STEVENS

THUNDER
5
THUNDER
2
THUNDER
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THUNDER
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Love's
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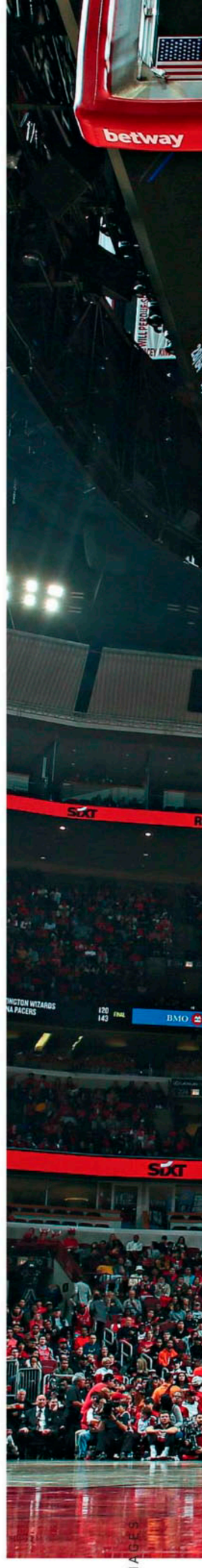


RIGHT: GARY DINEEN/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

HERE WE ARE. RIGHT NOW, here are our feet. All that matters is right now. The future is too far away to be a thought. And the past's impact has led to this group of Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Lu Dort, Chet Holmgren, Josh Giddey and Jalen Williams sitting right next to each other. Through expert scouting and drafting, and one clairvoyant trade, the sound of thunder is getting louder and louder.

So, right now, here we are.

We're in an empty room in the bowels of the Paycom Center in downtown Oklahoma City. Good energy is flowing freely. These five players are in sync with each other. There's a lot of laughter, a lot of jokes, a lot of compliments and some healthy trash talk (Shai swears that none of them have ever beaten him in King of the Court).

As the core of this squad, these five players have somehow quickly learned invaluable lessons in chemistry. They're very much linked. They pass one ball back and forth to each other throughout our interview. Even though Holmgren missed all of last season with a right foot injury, he was still with the squad and he easily breaks down why the Thunder click so well.

"This is my first NBA team," Holmgren says, "but I'd say what separates this team from most NBA teams is most NBA teams got a bunch of 30-year-olds

and then you'll have some new dudes come in every couple years and, like, cycle through that. There's no real connection because you got the OGs and then you got the lil' bros and it's like, the lil' bros gotta carry the bags, you know what I mean? It's, like, a hierarchy. But here, we're damn near all still kids. So we all cool."

Yes, this group is young. Gilgeous-Alexander is the oldest at 25, followed by the 24-year-old Dort, the 22-year-old Williams, and Giddey and Holmgren, the pair of 21-year-olds. But last season proved how well they play high IQ basketball together, minus Holmgren. Their defense was in the top half of the League, an impressive accomplishment for a group without years of experience. Their offense is an ever-evolving organism of dynamic movement, only possible through selfless harmony.

Mark Daigneault has crafted a system that emphasizes this togetherness. Beyond the highlights of Gilgeous-Alexander's scoring outbursts, Williams' dunks, Giddey's passes, Dort's steals and Holmgren's blocks, a true foundation has been built. It stands on unity and commitment. They've pledged themselves to crisp ball and player movement and highly timed switchability. It's easy to miss. All five of these guys, and many other players on the Thunder, are cold as ice. They play in rare sneakers, rock clothing that displays their

distinct auras and move with a general ease. But this is a real basketball team. They can hoop.

Nothing better illustrates how equally smart and well prepared they are than their strong side cuts. It jumps out immediately when watching Giddey's individual highlights and Williams' individual highlights. The same plays pop up in both film studies. The rhythm to their offense starts to emerge when Giddey drives to the right side of the floor. Williams regularly hits the same cut from the right wing whenever Giddey approaches his defender. Time it out next time the Thunder play. Usually two or three dribbles from the Melbourne native, JDub finds his angle and then...BOOM. A big dunk. JDub already has a few serious body bags.

"We practice it every day," Giddey says about the strong-side cuts to the rim.

Hold up, though. Record scratch. We can't know that. Nobody's supposed to know that.

"Cut that out, bro," Gilgeous-Alexander jumps in after a seemingly nervous laugh from JDub. "We don't wanna give away the sauce." Sitting on the far right, Gilgeous-Alexander looks over to his teammates and says it again with a sly smile. "We don't practice that, bro. We don't practice that. It just happens. They just figure it out," he says with another smile.

Alright, so Gilgeous-Alexander just happened to average 31 points a night. And Dort just happened to figure out how to increase his total points scored in every season of his career. And Giddey just stumbled upon pulling down 7.9 rebounds and dishing out 6.2 assists each

game. And JDub somehow walked into playing 30 minutes per game as a rook. And Holmgren was the No. 2 overall pick by happenstance. Alright, alright, alright.

There's no reason for any of it. It all just...happened?

Maybe. But probably not. Because we're here right now in the present, with the past's impact being fully felt and the future too far away to be a thought, we can look at each of these players truthfully.

There's the dynamic scorer, the young big whose potential might be limitless, the trusted playmaker, the lockdown perimeter defender and the versatile do-everything-forward. To varying degrees, each of them can dribble, pass and find their own looks. To varying degrees, each of them can sink an open shot. To varying degrees, each of them can make game-defining plays. To the same degree, each of them have bought into Daigneault's vision. That vision started with patience. They've been biding their time.

For now...

FAR LEFT: GARY DINEEN/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; FAR RIGHT: MELISSA TAMEZ/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER'S rise in the NBA dates back to his rookie year. He started for a surprising Clippers squad that caught everyone off guard by taking the dominant Warriors to six games in the 2019 playoffs. He was just 20 years old gifting the defending champs with 25 points in a playoff game. There was substance to his game that a lot of people didn't realize. They saw him, and they saw a young kid. He made them see him as an expanding problem. The Thunder saw him as a certified solution. They brought him to Oklahoma City in July of 2019 (the same trade gave OKC the pick that JDub was eventually selected with in 2022). Gilgeous-Alexander's iso game continued to grow. He's become nearly unguardable. Most know him as crafty. Very few know him as a reader. But he's not reading books. He's reading defenses like they're children's books. He gets to his spots and cashes out. A lot of his damage comes from the...duh-duh-duh...dreaded midrange area.

"If you look at it, the most prolific scorers in the NBA and over the years have shot midranges," Gilgeous-Alexander says. "Kevin Durant, T-Mac, Kobe, Devin Booker right now, Bradley Beal, Jimmy Butler. At the end of the

day, you just make shots. Where it comes from is your choice, but as long as you make them, you'll be alright."

Gilgeous-Alexander plays at his own pace. He's methodical with the ball in his hand. The Thunder, as a squad, play fast, thanks in part to Giddey. He's a pure point guard who stands 6-8, blessed with sightlines high above defenses. Gilgeous-Alexander and Williams sing his praises right after we're sworn to secrecy about those strong-side cuts that definitely don't get practiced every day.

"I'm gonna give you the answer right now—it's Josh Giddey," Gilgeous-Alexander says. "When you have a passer like that, it's inevitable."

"It makes you move," Williams joins in.

"You have to cut, you have to move," Gilgeous-Alexander continues. "And he'll find you."

"There's only one team in the world with a Josh Giddey," Holmgren adds.

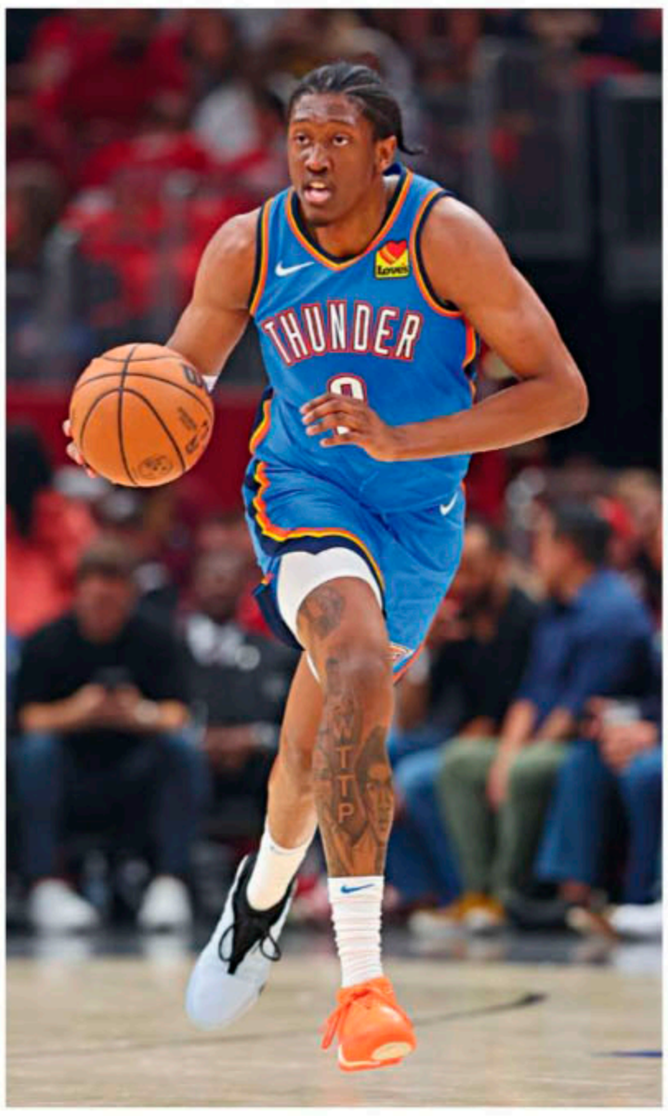
"I'm being dead serious," Gilgeous-Alexander emphasizes. "A lot of it is Josh. He'll find you if you're open. So get open."

"Vanilla Magic," Holmgren says.

Giddey silently sits in between his teammates. He's not boisterous. He's just effective. Very effective.

"It feels good to make other [teammates] feel good," he says.

One of the teammates that is consistently on the other end of Giddey's dimes is Williams. They were undeniably aligned with each other. Giddey loves to initiate the offense from below the three-point line. He finds JDub because JDub never stops moving. It seems like



JDub has echolocation on for gaps in the defense. But the rook also demonstrated advanced ability with the rock in his hand. He's already efficient in the pick-and-roll, which he credits to spending three years in college at Santa Clara. Whether he's got the ball or is setting the screen and diving to the rim, he knows how to do it far better than most players his age. He played almost every position and role at Santa Clara. His time at school served as a first-class education in hoops. Like Gilgeous-Alexander, JDub reads the defense and takes what he's being given.

"Especially since I got into the NBA, a lot of it has been tailored toward playing off of who's on the court," Williams says. "If I'm out there with them, a lot of it is reading stuff," he says about his high-profile teammates. "*Where am I going to cut from?* or *Where I'm going to get open shots from?* Other than that, it's just kind of, like, going downhill."

The Thunder do indeed play fast and they drive to the tin a lot. A *lot*. There are already a handful of names in Dub's graveyard. Those questions about his lack of athleticism going into the draft have been disproven over and over. Not only do those downhill attacks produce

FAR LEFT: MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES; FAR RIGHT: MELISSA TAMEZ/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jalen Williams dunks—they also produce Lu Dort threes. Dort has worked extremely hard on his jumper since coming into the League back in 2019. His reputation as a defensive stopper is of course very true. Dort's footwork while evading on-ball picks should be taught to every kid in the nation.

Dort's revamped jumper hides a unique and often overlooked detail. Shooters are taught to extend and hold their follow-throughs. It really does aid in the shot's probability of dropping, especially when shooting from over 24 feet away. Dort, however, rarely holds his follow-through. Most of the time, his right hand retreats. He doesn't hold it up.

Taken by surprise when it's pointed out, Dort shows how his right wrist has a hitch in it.

"My wrist is messed up, you know what I mean? So when I do it, I'm not doing it on purpose," he says.

The reveal makes Gilgeous-Alexander gasp. It makes Giddey grin. It makes Holmgren stare.

"Oh my God, I'm learning so much," JDub says. "Wow, I did not know that."

It's a comfortable and natural reaction for him. And it's worked. His shot has consistently gotten better throughout his career, while his defensive prowess has grown, too. He has tons of lockdown knowledge to share with Holmgren. Last season, the Thunder's defensive principles were specifically designed to mitigate their lack of size on the interior. That all changes with the return of the 7-1 rookie. Holmgren is gonna score. OKC's offense will get him open looks. But he's gonna make his name on the other side of the ball. He has switchability in the pick-and-roll, so he'll be tasked with guarding smalls in space. He has weak side swats on lock thanks to his 7-6 wingspan. Plus, he's much more competitive than he looks. People have been trying him for years now. He always responds.

"I really just learned how good the talent level is in the NBA," Holmgren says about his one year away from the court. "You could play great defense and literally not make a mistake and still give up three points. There's great players in this League and great players make plays. Sometimes it's just good defense, better offense."

He's ready for the challenge.

But that's looking just ahead to the future. It's still a little far away.

Right now, these five guys got a few more things to do. They gotta throw on some jewelry. They gotta take some photos. They gotta laugh some more. And they gotta fully be where their feet are, down here in the basement of the Paycom Center, all eyes on the coming season. S

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA IS HERE

WE'VE SEEN ALL THE VIRAL HIGHLIGHTS FROM HIS OVERSEAS DAYS, HIS SUMMER LEAGUE GAMES, HIS PRESEASON PERFORMANCES. WE'VE READ ABOUT HIM, WATCHED HIS INTERVIEWS, CONSUMED COUNTLESS SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS ABOUT HIM. NOW, FINALLY, IT'S TIME TO WATCH ROOKIE SENSATION VICTOR WEMBANYAMA PLAY NBA BASKETBALL. TO CELEBRATE THE MOMENT, WE GOT SAN ANTONIO SPURS SUPERFAN SHEA SERRANO TO EXPLAIN WHAT THIS MOMENT MEANS:

TO HIM, TO THE SPURS FAN BASE, TO THE WORLD. IT'S TIME.

WORDS **SHEA SERRANO**

Self.
SPURS
1
Wilson

THIS COVER STORY WILL eventually be about Victor Wembanyama, a 7-foot-4 exaggeration of a human and the most exciting and enticing new basketball prospect in two decades. First, though, it's going to be about Ralph.

Ralph is a security guard at the building where I office out of. He and I talk, were I to guess, for an average of about 45 seconds each day, almost always in the mornings when I first arrive at work and only ever about sports.

The way our interactions typically go is: I arrive to the building around 8 a.m. I type an entry code into a keypad at the front door. I wait half a second to hear a tiny clicking sound that lets me know that the door, large and metal and otherwise impenetrable, is momentarily unlocked. I pull the door open. I walk into the building. I look to my right. And that's where I see Ralph, who is stationed at a desk some 20 or so feet away. I say "Ralphieeeeeeeee," and I always stretch the final "E" out long like that in hopes that it makes me appear more charming and interesting than I actually am. He says, "What's up, Shea" back to me, but he says it in a normal way because he doesn't have to pretend to be charming and interesting because he actually is charming and interesting.

I walk over to him, we touch fists, and then I comment on something sports-related, to which he responds with something sports-related. Then there's one more conversational volley (either a follow-up to the first sports thing, or the introduction of a new sports thing that is slightly less important than the first), and then that's it. I smile and laugh and he smiles and laughs and then I walk away, both of us knowing we very likely will not see or talk to the other person again until the next morning, at which point we will reenact the entire scene again with only slightly different dialogue. We have done this each work day for nearly three years now. It's the best relationship I have ever had with someone who carries handcuffs.

When the Spurs won the NBA Draft Lottery this past May (and with it, the chance to draft Victor Wembanyama later that summer), I texted Ralph in celebration. We had never texted with each other before that moment (in fact, I had to text a separate person in the building to even get Ralph's phone number) or even spoken with one another anywhere in the world other than at his desk on a weekday morning. But I felt compelled to reach out to him that evening.

I felt compelled to expand the conditions and parameters of our relationship, even if I didn't realize that that's what I was doing at the time.

Victor Wembanyama bends and reshapes everything.

Basketball things, obviously.

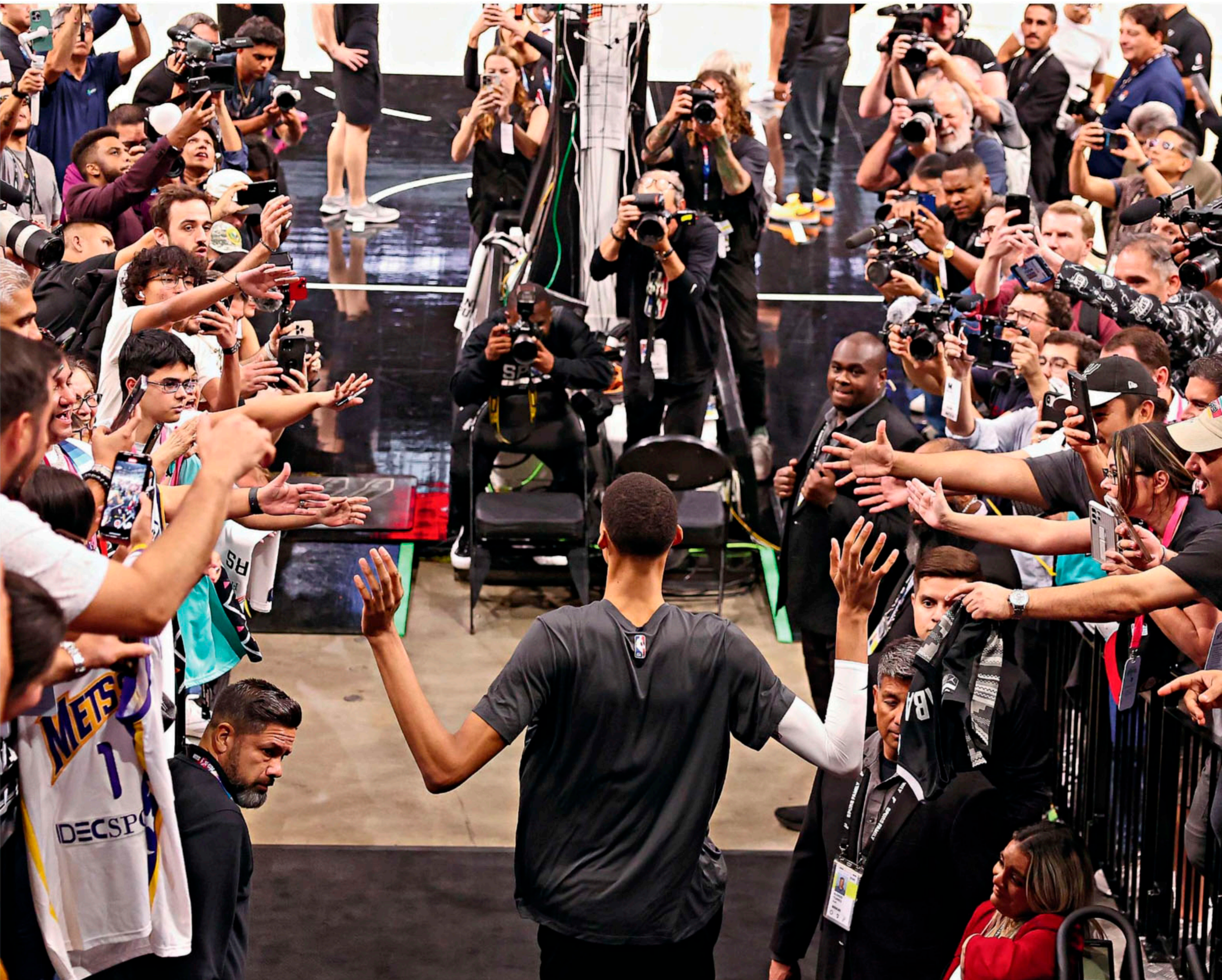
But other things, too, it seems.

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN WEIRD to watch a human who is 7-foot-3 or taller dribble a basketball, but it's never been weird the way Victor Wembanyama makes it weird. And what I mean is:

Picture, say, for example, Hasheem Thabeet (7-foot-3) dribbling the ball up the court. Or picture, say, for another example, Boban Marjanovic (7-foot-4) dribbling the ball up the court. Or picture, say, for a third example, Chuck Nevitt (7-foot-5) dribbling the ball up the court. Or picture, say, for a final example, Tacko Fall (7-foot-6) dribbling the ball up the court. Those are all very weird scenarios and situations and circumstances, both in abstraction and in practice. The arms, the legs, the elbows, the knees, the ball, the bouncing, the walking—it's just all a weird combination together. With regard to traditional basketball aesthetics, nothing is where it's supposed to be, or moving the way it's supposed to move. Somebody that tall bringing the ball up the court is something that, if you turned on your TV and happened to see it during a game, you would say to yourself some version of, "OK. Well, clearly something has gone wrong with this offensive possession. This couldn't possibly have been the first option."

But that's not what you say when you

PREVIOUS: MICHAEL GONZALES/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT: JED JACOBSOHN/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES



see Victor Wembanyama bringing the ball up the court. What you say when you see Victor Wembanyama bringing the ball up the court is some version of, "OK. Well. Fuck. We're all dead."

Because it's smooth, the way he dribbles.

And fluid.

And coordinated.

And beautiful.

And devastating.

It's like if God was looking at a picture of a guard on someone's iPhone in heaven, touched the screen with his pinched-together index finger and thumb, expanded the image to make it bigger, and then was like, "Boom. There you go. That's a person now."

Victor Wembanyama dribbles a basketball completely normally.

That's why it's weird in a way that it's never been weird before.

THE SAN ANTONIO SPURS played the Miami Heat on October 13, 2023. It was the first home game of the preseason for the Spurs, and so I guess that was a little bit why it was important, but also Victor Wembanyama was playing in it, and so that's mainly why it was important.

And I would like to tell you about one specific play from that night.

So:

With a little under 40 seconds to go in the second quarter, Wembanyama dribbled the ball up the court. There was no rush. And there was no urgency. There was just a very tall person dribbling a basketball calmly and confidently and normally, which, again, was entirely weird.

His defender, a 6-foot-10 League veteran named Thomas Bryant, waited for him in a defensive position a few feet

beyond the three-point line.[1]

As Wembanyama crossed the half court line, Tre Jones (point guard for the Spurs) hustled over and angled to set a screen on Bryant. Wembanyama, spying the action, sped up slightly as Jones approached, hoping to force Bryant into making some kind of defensive mistake.

Bryant didn't, though. He did what you're supposed to do when a smaller player heads over to set a screen on a bigger player out on the perimeter: you get ready for the smaller player to slip the screen at the last second so as to create a new second action to potentially exploit a suddenly out of position defense.

And that's exactly what happened.

Bryant's instincts were 100 percent correct.

And it made 0 percent of a difference.

Jones slipped the screen and slid over to the right bend area of the three-point line. Wembanyama passed him the ball. And Bryant sat back in the space waiting for Jones to make a decision. And that's when everything turned to muck for him, and for the Heat, and

1 I have to imagine that it was the first time in his life Thomas Bryant has ever had to earnestly guard a person taller than him that far away from the basket.

(potentially) (probably)[2] for the NBA.

Before Jones had even fully gathered the ball, Wembanyama, still out past the three-point line, pointed to the sky. The gesture, while completely ludicrous in its implication, was impossible to misinterpret. Despite (a) still being 22 or so feet from the rim, and despite (b) having a defender to his immediate left, and despite (c) Bryant still being directly involved in the play, and despite (d) the other three Miami Heat defenders also being in the general area, Wembanyama wanted Jones to throw him an alley-oop.

Jones, suddenly an audience member on stage with a magician during the reveal of a big trick, decided he wanted to see what would happen if he did what Wembanyama was asking him to do, and so he did what Wembanyama was asking him to do.

Right as the ball touched his hands, Jones tossed it up into the air.

Victor dove into the paint, planted both shoes nine feet before the rim, jumped as four of the five Heat defenders converged in the area,[3] snatched the ball out of the atmosphere with both hands, cocked it back, then thunderdunked it before anyone else could even jump.

The arena, rightly, erupted.

The internet, rightly, erupted.

Reggie Miller, who was one of the commentators calling the game that night, rightly, erupted.

"LOOK AT THIS!" he shouted, his voice fat with astonishment.

Or: "LOOK AT THIS!" he shouted, his voice fat with surprise.

Or: "LOOK AT THIS!" he shouted, his voice fat with glee.

Or: "LOOK AT THIS!" he shouted, because that's the only thing you can shout when you're in the middle of watching something as ridiculous as a 7-foot-4 Frenchman fly into the paint against a completely set defense, jump from several feet outside of the restricted circle, and then dunk an alley-oop that he called for from out past the three-point line.

It was such a wild play.

And an unbelievable play.

And a preposterous play.

It was also, at best, only the fourth most impressive thing Victor Wembanyama would end up doing that night.[4]

FROM LEFT: CHANDAN KHANNA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL GONZALES/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE SAN ANTONIO Spurs played the Golden State Warriors on October 20, 2023. It was the final game of the preseason for the Spurs, and so I guess that was a little bit why it was important, but also Victor Wembanyama was playing in it, and so that's mainly why it was important.

During the game, Victor Wembanyama: (1) caught a pass out past the three-point line, crossed over his defender off the dribble, pump faked a jumper, then pulled up for real as his defender floated harmlessly past him; (2) grabbed a defensive rebound, brought the ball up court, initiated the offense, then hit an and-one circus shot from behind the backboard while being pushed out of bounds (he also hit the accompanying free throw); (3) closed out from 10 feet away to block a Klay Thompson three-pointer and then sprinted down court to receive and dunk the post-block outlet pass (my favorite part of this play is that he caught the pass, hit

2 Or "(hopefully)," if you're a Spurs fan.

3 Bryant was the only one smart enough to know that the only thing waiting for him in the paint was ruination.

4 The three that beat it: (3) Eurostepping from the three-point line all the way to the rim in just two steps for a dunk; (2) Dribbling the ball up the court past one defender, hitting the second defender with an in-and-out dribble to get him off balance, then dribbling between his own legs into a stepback jumper from the free-throw line over two defenders; and (1) Somehow dunking it over Bryant from outside of the restricted area, and I don't mean that he jumped toward the rim from outside the area, which is something that happens often in NBA games, I mean that he was outside of the restricted circle, jumped straight up, and then simply reached every inch of his 10-foot-long left arm out and dunked the ball in a manner that, all at once and with great collective volume, was immediately likened to Michael Jordan's end-of-game dunk from half court in 1996's *Space Jam*.

FROM LEFT: THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES; TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

the brakes, waited for a trailing Klay Thompson to zoom by, then waited an extra second so that a second defender could catch up and get dunked on); and (4) defended a smaller player on the perimeter, forced him into the paint, blocked his shot, ran down court as Jeremy Sochan gathered the errant ball, caught a pass from Sochan, then pulled up for 3, splashing it in.

It was four great plays that would look great on anybody's full-game highlight reel.

Victor Wembanyama did them all over just a 90-second stretch in the middle of the first quarter.

THERE IS NO PRECEDENT for Victor Wembanyama.

There's no single player you can reach backwards in time for and attach him to, like how when LeBron James showed up and people were like, "He's the next Michael Jordan," or how when Clarence Weatherspoon showed up and people were like, "He's the next Charles Barkley," or how when any white player shows up and people are like, "He's like that other white player."

There is no precedent for Victor Wembanyama.

There are only amalgamations.

"He's like if you mixed Hakeem Olajuwon and Kevin Durant."

"He's like if you mixed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with Tracy McGrady."

"He's like if you mixed a fighter jet and a jaguar."

That's the kind of shit you have to say when you talk about him.

I have no idea how Victor Wembanyama's career is going to play out.

I suspect there will be championship rings and MVP trophies and various other accolades.

But that's just a guess.

What I do know, though, is that right now, right at this particular moment, it kind of doesn't matter.

What matters is what he's already given us, which is to say:

Joy.

And excitement.

Excitement for now and excitement for the future.

Excitement in imagining what might be; what he might do; what he might mean for basketball; what he might mean for everything.

Victor Wembanyama is here. **S**

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THE MAINE EVENT

MAINE-BRED HS SUPERSTAR COOPER FLAGG HAS GRINDED HIS WAY TO THE TOP OF THE RANKINGS, BLENDING TOGETHER A DO-EVERYTHING GAME WITH A HIGH-FLYING ATHLETICISM THAT HAVE MADE HIM THE MOST EXCITING PROSPECT IN HIGH SCHOOL HOOPS. WHAT'S NEXT? WELL, HE'LL PLAY HIS SENIOR SEASON AT MONTVERDE ACADEMY, THEN HEAD UP TO DURHAM TO OFFICIALLY JOIN THE BROTHERHOOD. GET READY, CRAZIES.

WORDS FRANKLYN CALLE | PORTRAITS MARCUS STEVENS

DUKE
2
ELITE

NEWPORT, MAINE.

Population...roughly 3,000.

It is here where the epicenter of the biggest story in high school basketball originates.

It is here where one of the most highly touted high school prospects in recent memory began his hoops odyssey.

A journey that technically can be traced back to the early 1990s. That's when Cooper Flagg's mother, Kelly, was turning heads on the hardwood at Nokomis Regional High School on her way to scoring 1,257 career points. Nokomis would become the same school where almost three decades later, one of her three sons would begin capturing the attention of the basketball universe.

Kelly went on to play DI ball at the University of Maine from 1995-99, where she embarked on an incredible run that included four consecutive American East titles and making appearances in the NCAA Tournament all four years. Her senior year, when she was the captain, Kelly was a starter and led the Black Bears over Stanford to the program's first and only NCAA Tournament win.

She was already a Maine hoops legend in the '90s, but her contributions to the game were only just beginning.

Enter...Cooper Flagg. It wouldn't take long for Kelly to notice that Cooper—born seven years after her collegiate run and a minute after his twin brother Ace—wasn't the typical elementary school kid. Looking to challenge him, she enrolled him on a 4th grade rec league team—as a second grader.

"I remember the ball was going out of bounds on the baseline, the other team's end of the floor. He jumped up in the air and palmed the ball. Cooper didn't just chuck it back inbounds to anybody, he kept it in play and found a teammate at the same time. Moments later, he sprinted down to the other end of the floor and caught it for a layup. I don't know that I've ever seen a 7-year-old have those kinds of instincts," she recalls. "It was apparent to us that year when the rec season ended that he needed more. That is not what you normally see in a 7- or 8-year-old kid.

"There were a lot of weekends we went to play and they would only have five or six kids," she adds. "As a second grader, he never left the floor and would just be exhausted because they would play two or three games in a day. The next year, we got him on a team as a third grader with fifth grade boys. That was a really good fit for him. Their team played more of a five in, five out style."

"I remember the first couple of practices just being really tough. I would come out really tired and exhausted," says Cooper. "I think I had a bunch of bruises. It was just really rough to start out because of how much older everyone was. I was also just as tall as them from a really young age, so I didn't really feel out of place, but you could tell that they were more physically developed than me... That's something that I look back on and I'm really thankful for. Both of my parents always pushed me to play against older competition. It helped me to develop a lot earlier."

At the end of Cooper's third grade year,

Kelly was approached by Andy Bedard, whom she had gone to college with but had subsequently lost contact with. He had gotten her number from Amy Vachon, the current women's basketball head coach at the University of Maine, and expressed interest in having her sons join the youth team he was coaching, which also included his own son, Kaden. Andy had begun hearing rumblings that Kelly's kids were pretty good at basketball. There was only one little problem: Andy was based out of Portland—an hour and a half away from where the Flaggs lived.

But with the family committed to the game (Cooper's dad, Ralph, also hooped collegiately at Eastern Maine Community College) and the boys' continued development, they decided to make the trip multiple times per week, on weekdays. At times, these trips even included numerous family members and car swaps. When Kelly wasn't able to drive the boys all the way to practice, she says her father would take them halfway, where Ralph, who worked in Portland, would meet them. The boys would hop in his car, and he'd drive them the rest of the way to practice.

"We would then hop in the vehicle, and I would have already made lots of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sometimes we ordered a pizza ahead and grabbed it on the way so that they could get some food," says Kelly. "We would get down there for practice at 4:30. We practiced until 6 or 6:30, and then we would head back home. There were a lot of [long] nights for 10-year-olds [where] we were getting home at 9 at night on a school night. It was a big commitment, and we did that twice a week, but it was all worth it."

To help pass time on those long car rides, Kelly would have the boys watch recordings of the 1980s Celtics' championship teams. It helped set the foundation for their basketball knowledge, serving as a way to learn the game's history while also doubling as elite film study sessions...and three-plus hours of much needed in-car entertainment.

"We would always either have the '85 or '86 Celtics championship games on or the Magic Johnson vs. Larry Bird movies. It instilled Bird's mindset within me and Ace. How he was always the hardest worker, no matter what," recalls Cooper. "Especially from that Celtics team that played against the Rockets, it was more about the teamwork and the ball movement."

By the time Cooper and Ace were ready to attend high school, it was an obvious choice where they would go—Nokomis Regional, the same program where their mom starred in the early '90s, and, well, the only high school in the city of Newport.

They entered their freshman year in the fall of 2021 under a unique set of circumstances. With the world still reeling from the effects of a global pandemic, Cooper, Ace and his teammates had to wear masks while playing. But more unique was the family affair that the opportunity provided. On the team was also their older brother, Hunter, who was a senior. But as the season progressed, the roles between the

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32
ACADEMY

younger brothers and their oldest sibling began to shift.

"The team was really bad for years leading up to that year and that run they had," Kelly says. "They were 1-17 for two years in a row. In Hunter's junior year, they were 3-15. Hunter was a big who got a lot of minutes and was a starter in his sophomore and junior years. Early on in [Cooper's and Ace's freshman] season, all three of them started. Cooper averaged six dunks a game in middle school. The buzz that his name was generating in the state of Maine around basketball was extraordinary before he even played his first high school game. People just couldn't wait to see him play. A couple of games into the season after a successful preseason, the coach had Hunter and another senior coming off the bench. Both of them handled it so well even though it was a tough pill to swallow. All the seniors were so gracious and were just excited to have a winning team. Even the parents of the senior boys were amazing."

That season ended up being one for the ages. The team went 21-1 on their way to capturing the state title. Cooper began to show the same flashes of elite talent that the rest of the world has now caught up on. He averaged 21 points, 10 rebounds and 6 assists that season as a ninth grader. The USA Basketball website highlights one particular outing where he dropped 32 points, 13 rebounds, 9 assists, 5 blocks and 3 steals in an early January game.

"[Having Ace, Hunter, and me on the same team] was always something we were excited about. It was a really fun year in general because it was going to be our last year with Hunter. We knew that we probably weren't going to be going back to Nokomis after that year, so we had a lot of fun with it," says Cooper. "Winning the state championship together was a dream we always had, and something we wanted to do together for the community...We knew what the team was going to be because we had a fall ball team that had been playing together since the summer. Ace and I had been playing up with the varsity [team] during the summer."

As if the Flaggs' story so far wasn't already a Hollywood-type script, the story behind the supporting cast of that championship team really drives home the point. When Kelly was a senior at Nokomis, she shared the floor with teammates Penny, Jaime, Katie and Amanda—fast forward some three decades later, and their respective sons—Dawson Townsend, Ethan Cote, Alex Grant and Madden White—were all now sharing that same floor with Kelly's kids at the very same school. A reminder of just how small the Newport community really is.

After the movie-esque season, though, came a difficult decision. The family had to decide between continuing their high school careers at Nokomis or making the sacrifice of relocating in search of a chance to take their games to the next level. In the end, the latter took precedence, and Cooper and Ace found themselves on their way to Florida for their sophomore campaigns, enrolling at national powerhouse Montverde Academy. Aside from featuring an unmatched alumni list that includes Cade Cunningham, Scottie Barnes, Ben Simmons, Joel Embiid (transferred out), D'Angelo Russell and RJ Barrett, among a plethora of other NBA players, the Eagles are renowned for their state-of-the-art facilities and playing a top-notch

national schedule that competes against the country's top talent. It's been regarded as the closest thing to a DI program at the high school level. In fact, since 2021, Montverde has had 12 players selected in the NBA Draft. In contrast, during that same period, Duke has had eight and Kentucky has had seven.

"There were these whispers about a kid that was potentially very good, from Maine of all places, and they were playing at The Big House, which is 30 minutes from our school in Florida in a Made Hoops event," recalls Montverde head coach Kevin Boyle. "So, I went there to watch some of our younger guys and to see what kind of potential Cooper had. You could just see he had a competitiveness and athleticism that at minimally, he was going to be an outstanding player."

The move to Montverde helped raise Cooper's profile on a national scale while also taking his game up a notch. In 2022, he became the youngest ever USA Basketball Male Athlete of the Year.

The competitive side of Cooper is no more evident than when you hear him talk about the driveway battles he's had with his family throughout the years. Those would get really heated sometimes, and no one was safe from it, not even his own mother.

"Countless hours spent in the driveway battling against both of [my brothers]. Too many fights to remember. Just a lot of fun we used to have playing against each other and just battling," says Cooper. "Me and my mom used to battle all the time [too]. I think the last time we played was in fifth grade. She actually got hurt when we were playing, and we haven't played since. So I never beat her. I was beating her that one time. I was up 9 to 8 in a game to 11, but then she got hurt."

"That's not exactly the way I remember it happening," says Kelly, after getting wind of Cooper's 1-on-1 recollection. "He may have been in the lead, but I'm sure had I not torn my meniscus, I would have come back and beaten him in that game. I drove to the left and did a hard jump stop. He went flying, and I would have scored and tied up the game. When I planted it, I just felt [like] something was not right. So, he technically has never beaten me.

"I didn't play them that often," she adds. "Every once in a while, I would get in there just to remind them who the boss was. All three of our boys had battles. Those occurred daily, or at least several times a week. Every single time that the three of them went out to play, we knew that it was going to end in some sort of physical fight or verbal altercation. There was usually someone bleeding at the end. The ball was chucked across the street. It didn't end well. I attribute that to their competitiveness, especially in those early days of wanting to win."

Stories of just how competitive Cooper is are rampant. When Coach Boyle is asked for a story that perfectly reflects Cooper's personality, he laughs for a few seconds before recalling the time Cooper had to be separated from a practice scuffle...with his own twin brother.

"It was Cooper and his brother swinging at each other in practice when they were on opposing teams," Boyle says. "They got tangled up in a few plays and we had to break them up after throwing punches at each other. It's a good story because it just shows the competitiveness in him because the family all love each other dearly, but when they're on the court, they're competing. It's one of the few fights at practice we've had since I've been at

Montverde. It brought a smile to my face, it brought me back to the St. Patrick [HS in Elizabeth, NJ] days."

As impressive as his game is, it's the fact that he's still only 16 years old that really hits. He'll be 17 for his first four months of college since his birthday isn't until December. Beyond the skill set, hard commitment to both ends of the floor, impressive athleticism, otherworldly confidence and poised demeanor, Cooper is barely old enough to be in his current grade.

This past summer, though, Cooper Flagg-mania hit a new tier. Unless you spent the warmer months of 2023 living under a rock, you likely saw highlights of Cooper in your feed at some point while scrolling on your phone. His name would trend on Twitter periodically and videos of him absolutely manhandling his peers drew the attention of hoop fans and added fire to the frenzy. This all led to an epic run at the Nike EYBL Peach Jam.

Playing for Maine United, which earlier in the spring looked to be in jeopardy of even qualifying for Peach Jam, Cooper and company ended up going on a Cinderella-type run in the days that followed. Although they entered the U16 Peach Jam with a 9-9 record, the team went undefeated (4-0) in pool play on its way to the championship game, where they ultimately fell short. Flagg averaged 25.4 points, 13.0 rebounds and 5.7 assists in the tournament and even had LeBron James approach him at one point to chop it up—an interaction that made the rounds online.

"It'd be tough for anybody to do a scouting report on me in terms of how they're going to take me out of a game," Cooper says. "They can take certain parts of my game away, but I think that I'm too versatile and too much of a well-rounded player that no team can take me out of the game.

"In terms of challenging, I don't really know if I could say something that's really challenging because most of the things that people would see as challenging are an outcome of some opportunity that I've been given. You have to look at it in that way."

For Cooper, though, it wasn't just about shocking the world in leading an unbeknownst AAU team from Maine, of all places, to the title game of the most prestigious grassroots circuit in the world—all after barely maintaining a .500 record going into the final session. It was more about the fact that this very same AAU program was full of teammates that he met when he would travel 3+ hours for practice as a fourth grader. It was the culmination of an almost decade-long journey alongside some kids from The Pine Tree State with similar hoop dreams as his.

Not long after, Cooper found himself having to make yet another high-stakes, life-altering decision this past summer: stay in his current class and continue to the dominate everyone in front of him, or reclassify up and join the senior class of 2024, which would expedite his ultimate dream of going pro one day. He chose the latter, of course.

And although everyone watched his meteoric rise this year on social media, what they didn't see was that behind the scenes, Cooper was taking summer classes when he wasn't traveling around the country and tearing up every event he stepped foot in, all in order to put himself on track to have enough credits to reclassify up to the Class of 2024.

"It was really tough because when I was home, the main thing I was doing was schoolwork," Cooper says. "I had to focus on schoolwork over seeing my friends that I hadn't seen in months. Trying to balance all those different things was tough but something that I had to do."

All those previous decisions led to this current decision, his most important one yet. Deciding between UConn and Duke. Cooper visited both campuses in recent weeks, and when it came time to pick a destination, he went with his gut, just like he has with every other decision.

"I think after I got on campus at Duke, I really started to feel it, to be honest," he says. "That's something the coaches definitely stressed to me, that once you get to campus, it's something you have to feel. And [I knew then] I wanted to go to Duke and that's where I wanted to play college basketball. What went into the decision, I mean, I was just looking for a coaching staff I was really comfortable with, but [also] a coach and staff that was really going to hold me accountable. Being on the visit, I got to see them in practice, and see how they were holding their guys accountable, and really pushing them to be better. For me, ever since I was a little kid, I always had dreams of playing Division I basketball at the highest level. Especially with a place like Duke, once we got to campus, we felt it.

"I'm honored that I have the opportunity to join The Brotherhood, and hopefully I'll be one of the players that recruits are looking at some day and someone they can see themselves being. Especially from all the love I saw this last weekend when I was there, it made me really excited, all the [Cameron] Crazies and the fans. I think it's going to be a really exciting year and [fans] should

JOHN JONES/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

just get ready because I know that I'm all about winning, so I'm trying to keep that winning culture that Duke has."

In Durham, after wearing No. 32 his whole life—a jersey number retired by Duke thanks to Christian Laettner—Cooper has chosen to wear No. 2 instead, in honor of his close friend Donovan Kurt, who attended Nokomis Regional back in Maine (he wore No. 2) and passed away last year after a long battle with brain cancer.

"[This] is something that I'm trying to carry with me. [I want to] prove that kids from Maine can make it if they put their minds to it and they really work hard enough," says Cooper. "That's something that I'm taking a lot of pride in. It's proving to everybody from Maine, the rest of the country, and around the world, that kids from Maine can make it." S

GAME TIME

THERE WILL BE TONS OF UPSETS THROUGHOUT THE 2023-24 COLLEGE BASKETBALL SEASON, OF COURSE, BUT WE'RE BETTING THE LAST TEAMS STANDING NEXT APRIL WILL BE SOME FAMILIAR NAMES. DON'T @ US.

WORDS MICHAEL BRADLEY

MENS

1. Duke: The returns of Kyle Filipowski, Jeremy Roach, Tyrese Proctor and Mark Mitchell, along with another crop of four and five-star standouts, will make Jon Scheyer look like a pretty darn good coach this year.

2. Kansas: The Jayhawks are deep, versatile and nasty on defense. Adding Michigan center Hunter Dickinson makes them lethal in the pick-and-roll. If KU can stroke it from the outside, it will be national title time.

3. Michigan State: Tom Izzo says a Big Ten team has to win it all to prove the conference is elite. Here's a squad that can do it. The Spartans will grind like no other team, have plenty of experience and boast a first-rate backcourt.

4. Marquette: The Golden Eagles aren't that big, and they don't bang the boards like Visigoths, but oh, that backcourt. Tyler Kolek, Stevie Mitchell and Kam Jones can pile it on, and there should be enough inside for a shot at the Final Four.

5. Tennessee: Behold the college basketball equivalent of oral surgery. The Vols play like someone wants to steal their rent money. The guards are rugged, and if Zakai Zeigler's knee is healthy, big things—and sore opponents—lie ahead.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES; MATTHEW VISINSKY/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; KEN MURRAY/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; PORTER BINKS/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES; AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES; PORTER BINKS/GETTY IMAGES; RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES; PETER G. AIKEN/GETTY IMAGES

6. Purdue: He's back! The Big Maple, unguardable 7-4 center Zach Edey, returns to own the paint. The question is whether Fletcher Loyer and the perimeter team can hit shots. If they can, the Boilermakers will thrive.

7. Houston: Kelvin Sampson has done a masterful job creating a sustainable powerhouse with defense and tough love. The Cougars aren't pretty and certainly aren't fun to play, but they have won big—and will continue to do so.

8. Creighton: The Bluejays lost some talent to the portal but then added experienced contributors the same way. Call it a wash. Ryan Kalkbrenner is a two-way force inside, and he's surrounded by strong perimeter scorers.

9. Baylor: There are a bunch of new Bears, but they are good. Really good. Look out for freshmen guards Ja'Kobe Walter and Miro Little. Transfer RayJ Dennis can fill it up, and holdover Jalen Bridges is a steady frontcourt piece.

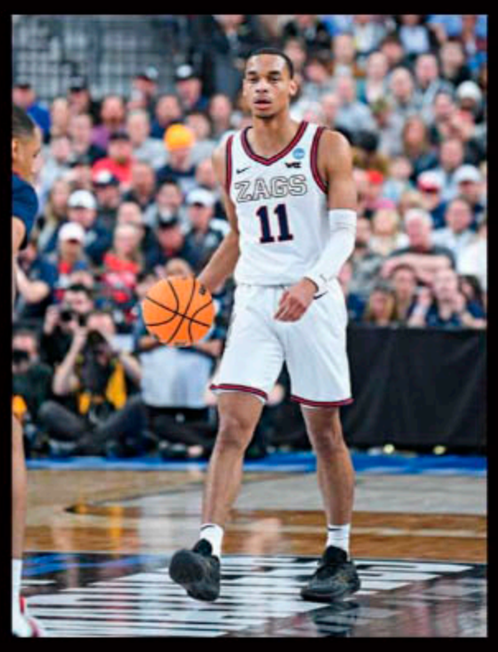
10. Florida Atlantic: Last year was a magical one-off, right? *Right?* Nope, all but one of the key Owls are back and ready for more. FAU is loaded with talented, experienced guards and has good depth. This encore should be fun.

11. Arizona: The Wildcats were big and slow last year. They're a lot quicker this time. Transfers Caleb Love and Keshad Johnson will be immediate standouts, and big man Oumar Ballo will cause all sorts of problems inside.

12. Villanova: It's time for Nova to head back to where it belongs. Last year was an anomaly. Guard Justin Moore and big man Eric Dixon are major producers, and four transfers will add depth and versatility.

13. Connecticut: The defending champs lost some real stalwarts, but big man Donovan Clingan is a budding star, Tristen Newton and Alex Karaban have plenty of experience, and Rutgers transfer Cam Spencer and a loaded crop of freshmen have arrived.

14. North Carolina: Armando Bacot and RJ Davis are back for their ninth seasons in Chapel Hill. At least it feels that way. Freshman point man Elliot Cadeau is the human assist, and transfers Harrison Ingram and Cormac Ryan are welcome additions.



15. Gonzaga: You want points? The Zags score plenty of them. Drew Timme's gone, but Mark Few found a bunch of high-octane newcomers to join returning starters Nolan Hickman and Anton Watson. Time to spin the scoreboards again.

16. Kentucky: It's been a while since John Calipari's bunch has made a national splash. It could happen this year. The freshman class is ridiculous. There are actual seniors (Antonio Reeves and Tre Mitchell) on the roster. UK is back.

17. Illinois: The Illini were supposed to be tough last year, but they sagged. Terrence Shannon Jr is back to make '23-24 different. He's joined by the usual strong cast of transfers. If Illinois can shoot it, plenty of wins will follow.

18. Miami: Wonder why Jim Larrañaga keeps hanging around Coral Gables? It's teams like this. Nijel Pack is a top-shelf guard, Norchad Omier can cause big problems inside, and wing Wooga Poplar is ready for big things.

19. Texas A&M: The Aggies waited until after the calendar turned to 2023 last season to play their best ball. There should be no delay this season, thanks to point man Wade Taylor IV and three other returning starters.

20. Arkansas: Mr. Transfer is at it once again in Fayetteville. Eric Musselman imported seven players from other schools, with Tramon Mark and Khalif Battle expected to team with returnee Davonte Davis in a potent backcourt.

21. San Diego State: The Aztecs lost a lot, but they will still grind and defend and fight. That's worth a lot. Lamont Butler leads four key holdovers, and USC transfer Reese Dixon has plenty of talent.

22. Texas: High-scoring Oral Roberts transfer Max Abmas brings serious juice to the Longhorns' attack. Rodney Terry is now the full-time boss, and he has guard Tyrese Hunter and forward Dylan Disu as featured performers.

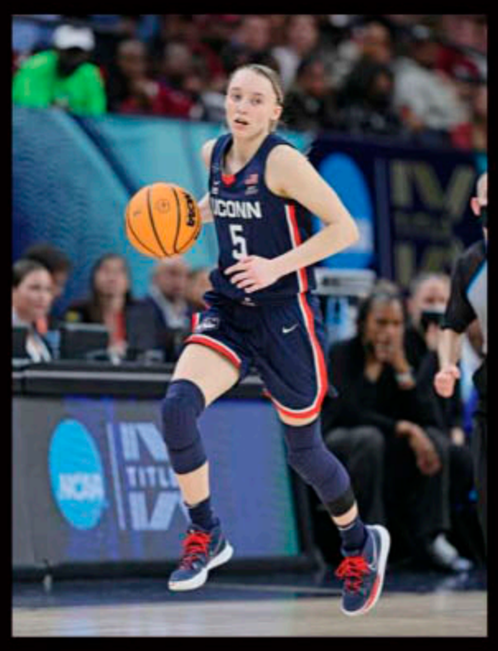
23. UCLA: Presenting the most interesting roster in college hoops. The Bruins are filled with international players, could start two centers and could look like a Euro professional team, style-wise. They might even try to play with one of those orange-and-white FIBA basketballs.

24. Virginia: The Cavs lost in the first round again last year. When that happened in 2018, they won it all the following season. It will be about defense again at UVA, with Reece Beekman up top and a bunch of stingy friends around him.

25. St. John's: Fast-talking Rick Pitino spent the offseason convincing a pile of high-scoring transfers to join potent pivot Joel Soriano in Queens. Jordan Dingle and Chris Ledlum were Ivy League killers, and Daniss Jenkins was a big producer at Iona.

WOMEN

1. LSU: Nobody can predict what Tigers coach Kim Mulkey will be wearing while prowling the sidelines, but everybody knows All-American Angel Reese is an unstoppable force. Louisville transfer Hailey Van Lith is a standout, and the backcourt is top shelf.



2. Connecticut: Paige Bueckers is back and healthy and will join Azzi Fudd in the nation's top backcourt. Assist machine Nika Mühl is another top guard, while forward Aaliyah Edwards is a big-time talent up front. If she gets help in the paint, UConn could hang another banner.

3. Iowa: If you don't know about Caitlin Clark, you must have been watching hockey all last winter. The high-scoring guard is one of the nation's best, but she needs help. Guards Kate Martin and Gabbie Marshall are top candidates, but Clark is the big show.

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4. UCLA: Guards Charisma Osborne and Kiki Rice are the big names, but the Bruins welcome back eight players from last year's rotation and add 6-7 center Lauren Betts from Stanford. Forward Emily Bessoir is ready to bust out.

5. South Carolina: Dawn Staley's Gamecocks are now Final Four fixtures, and there's no reason to think they won't get there this year. Oregon transfer Te-Hina Paopao is a big-time guard, and Kamilla Cardoso will be unstoppable inside.

6. Utah: Nobody knew about the Utes before last year, but they know now. A Sweet 16 appearance and the return of all five starters, led by star forward Alissa Pili, means Utah will attract way more attention this time.

7. Ohio State: The Buckeyes may need some time for the offense to develop, but OSU will play some nasty D from day one. Adding a backcourt ballhawk like Celeste Taylor from Duke will make Ohio State even tougher to handle.

8. Texas: Some might think this is a bit high for the 'Horns, but if forward Aaliyah Moore's knee is healed, it might not be high enough. Rori Harmon is a two-way dynamo at guard, and Shaylee Gonzales is another dangerous backcourt weapon.

9. Indiana: Yes, Grace Berger is gone, but have you met Mackenzie Holmes? If not, get acquainted with her. She's a big threat inside, and should opponents double her, there are a bunch of shooters outside to loosen up the D.

10. Virginia Tech: The Hokies are loaded with talent, and if everybody gets along like last year, look out. Center Elizabeth Kitley will team with standout guards Georgia Amoore and Cayla King in a tough, inside-out combo, while Minnesota transfer Alanna Micheaux will help plenty inside.

11. Tennessee: It's hard to believe the Vols haven't won the SEC in 10 years, but this crew will mount a big challenge. Forward Rickea Jackson is a standout, while 6-6 pivot Tamari Key can lock down the middle. Belmont point guard transfer Destinee Wells can dish and score.

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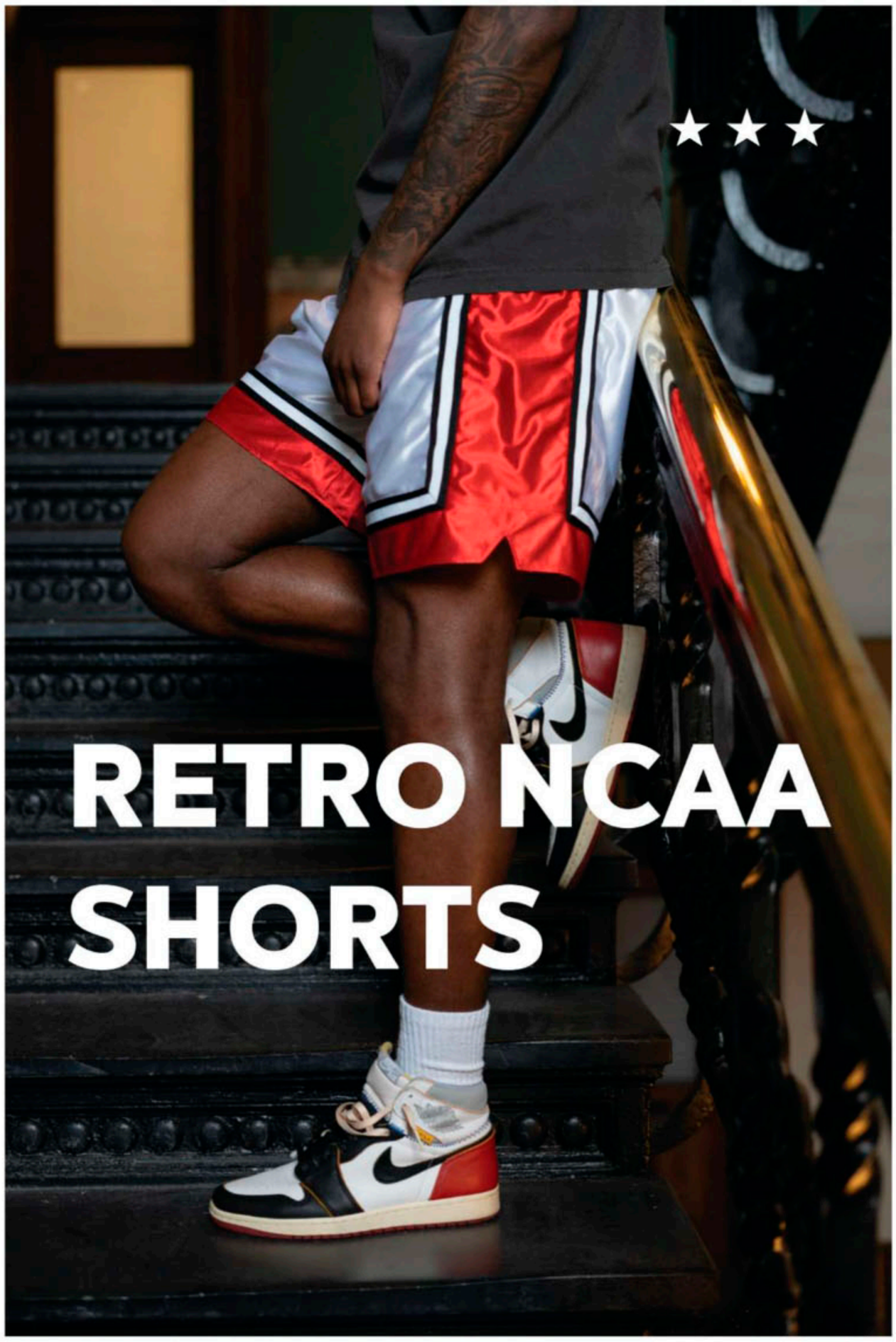

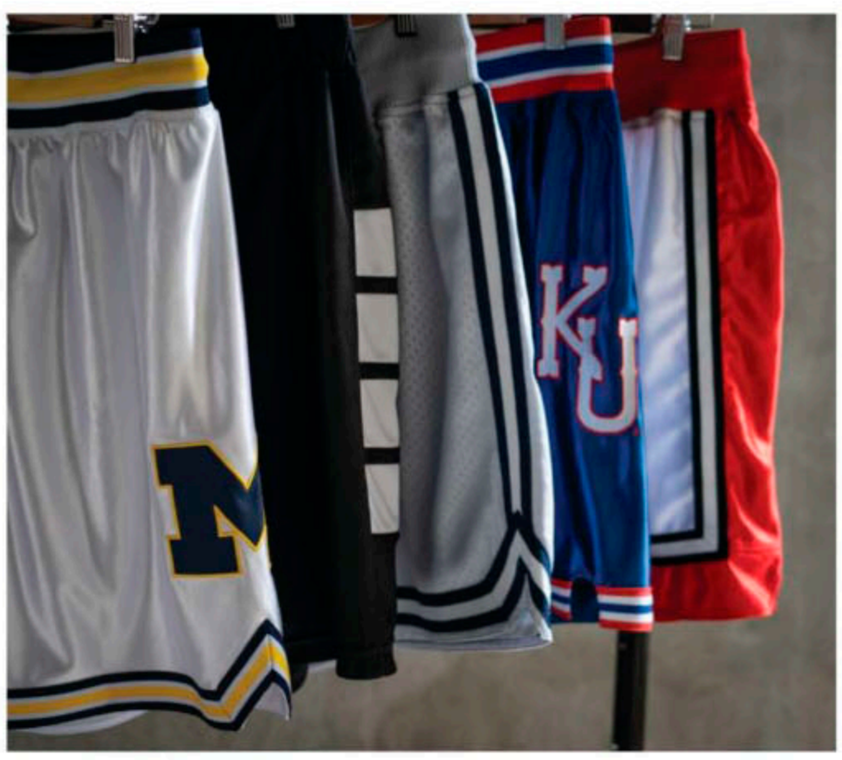

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12. Notre Dame: It's all about the backcourt in South Bend, and the top guard is Olivia Miles—provided her knee is healed. Sharpshooter Sonia Citron is a great weapon, while freshman Hannah Hidalgo could be special right away.

13. Baylor: These Bears will pile up the points, thanks to a roster loaded with bucket getters. Guard Sarah Andrews leads the way, but Darianna Littlepage-Buggs, Aijha Blackwell, Jada Walker and Dre'Una Edwards can all fill it up.

14. Mississippi: Not everybody on the Rebel roster started at Ole Miss, but fans are sure happy they came to campus. Marquesha Davis, Madison Scott and Snudda Collins are the core of a tough defensive unit fortified by talented transfers.

15. Louisville: Yes, the Cards lost Hailey Van Lith to the portal, but they added slick point guard Jayda Curry to a team with high-scoring guards Sydney Taylor and Kiki Jefferson. U of L will miss Van Lith, but this year's aggregation can be special.

16. North Carolina: The Tar Heels are deep, experienced and dangerous. Expect newcomers Lexi Donarski and Maria Gakdeng to contribute right away, while Deja Kelly and Alyssa Ustby are back after earning first-team All-ACC honors a year ago.

17. Florida State: Ta'Niya Latson's injury late last year hurt the Seminoles greatly. But she's back, along with high-scoring Makayla Timpson and Sara Bejedi, an inside-out tandem. Look out for transfer guard Alexis Tucker.

18. Maryland: You never have to worry about the Terps making enough outside shots. They can launch. The arrival of transfer Jakia Brown-Turner will make Maryland even more dangerous. Shyanne Sellers is a fine distributor, but depth could be a problem.

19. Colorado: Everybody's talking about Coach Prime and the CU football team, but the Buffs should be tough on the hardwood, too, thanks to six top returnees, most notably guard Jaylyn Sherrod and forward Quay Miller.

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20. Stanford: The Cardinal lost a ton of players from last year's squad, and Tara VanDerveer's rotation will be thin, but forward Cameron Brink is a star, and Talana Lepolo has a lot of potential at the point.

21. USC: The big news will be made by the newcomers. Former Ivy League snipers McKenzie Forbes and Kayla Padilla have talent, but the big name is freshman JuJu Watkins, who is almost unstoppable off the dribble.

23. Washington State: The Coogs are hoping to get their first-ever NCAA tourney win this year, and a deep returning cast, led by Charlisse Leger-Walker, could well make it happen. Wazzu is knocking. It's time to get through the door.

22. Creighton: Defending the Bluejays is hardly an easy job because they move the ball so well and end up with a bunch of open three-pointers. Four key players—Lauren Jensen, Morgan Maly, Emma Ronsiek and Molly Mogensen—are back to fire away.

24. Nebraska: Cornhusker fans prefer to forget the end of last season, but the returning duo of Jaz Shelley and Alexis Markowski should make '23-24 memorable. Montana State transfer Darian White is first-rate.

25. Kansas State: Gabby Gregory decided one more year in Manhattan was a good idea, and that means big things for the Wildcats. If 6-6 center Ayoka Lee is healthy, K-State will be a major Big 12 factor.

THE ARCHITECT

WHEN GENO AURIEMMA ARRIVED IN STORRS IN 1985, THE UCONN WOMEN'S BASKETBALL TEAM HAD ONLY ONE WINNING SEASON. SINCE THEN, THE PROGRAM HAS BEEN TO 22 FINAL FOURS AND TAKEN HOME 11 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS. HERE, THE LEGENDARY HEAD COACH SHARES HIS BLUEPRINT TO SUCCESS.

WORDS DEYSCHA SMITH

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BASKETBALL
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BASKETBALL

BASKETBALL
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THE PHONE RINGS. GENO Auriemma's name pops up on the caller ID. It's October, and the UConn head coach is surprisingly upbeat and pretty chatty given the business-first demeanor he typically exudes on the court, and most definitely to the media during press conferences. He's a legend, the Leonardo da Vinci responsible for igniting a renaissance in Storrs—and, really, all of women's hoops—by creating the formula for the most successful program of all time in NCAA women's basketball. No one has more championships or Final Four appearances than the Huskies. No one.

How'd he do it? Here, Auriemma reflects on his career, his legacy, and if he thinks anyone else will ever be able to do it like he has...

SLAM: Coach, it's an honor. How are you?
GENO AURIEMMA: Things have been going pretty well. We just started official practices, so we haven't been going for very long. Those have gone pretty well. We'll see what happens in the next week or so, but so far, so good.
SLAM: How do you approach the start of every season?
GA: Each year brings its share of similarities. There are certain things that you want to do, [but] there's also the unknown. *What kind of team are we going to have? What do we have to do different[ly] to accommodate this particular team?* So it's similar in some ways, it's different depending on the personnel that you have. But always the excitement is there, the challenges are there every summer, they're just different. It's refreshing to get back on the court because that's what we like to do. We've been doing this for a long time, and I think we have a pretty good routine that we follow and we go from there.
SLAM: How does year 38 feel?
GA: It's 38, 39, I don't even know how many it is. It's got the feel of other seasons that you're excited and anxious about. You're curious to find out how it fits together. You get someone like Paige Bueckers back, there's a real excitement in the building. There's a real excitement on our team. Aaliyah Edwards played a lot of basketball last year and a lot of minutes, Nika Mühl, the two of them. Aubrey [Griffin] played a ton of minutes. They picked up valuable experience. For me personally, there's a lot of excitement of wanting to see what this team could be. I feel like it's my job to make sure they get all the resources and guidance that they need from me and my staff to make it work for them.
SLAM: During the ups and downs of the early years, what kept you going?
GA: What happens in these situations is, who you have on your team, in your program, on your staff or whatever, that's the sources of your motivation. Those three years that it was a struggle, we kept our fingers crossed and just kept working. Even though it was difficult, and there were doubts, we never expressed those doubts to anybody—those were internal. On the outside, everybody thought everything was great and we're pushing and we're committed and we're going to be great. The reality was, this was really, really difficult, and we knew it was going to be difficult, but we didn't know it was going to be this hard. And like I said, it wasn't until 1988, and 1989 when we won the regular season and tournament, that there was some validation. When we did win, it was now, *How far can this group go?* It turned out we were able to get to the Final Four. Then we were able to get Rebecca Lobo to come to UConn. We had a terrific group of people with her and right behind her that made it [feel like], *Yeah, I really don't want to be anywhere else. I want to be right here with this group of people.*
SLAM: You're known for cultivating future WNBA stars. Do you see who your players can become before it even happens?
GA: When we see a player in high school, we have an impression and we say, *Hey, I see similarities between this kid and so and so.* They get to campus, and as you start coaching them, you start to feel this like, *Yes, this kid's really got something,* or, *Man I really missed on this one.* Or, you didn't expect much, and you go, *Wow, this kid is way better than I thought.* You coach all of them from the beginning like they don't know anything, and that's the way we've always done it. Whether we get a kid who didn't make first-team All-State, or we get a kid who was Player of the Year out of high school, we coach them the same.

We start at the beginning and we try to make them better players. We're not going to go in there and think that because they're this talented or because they were all this, that they are ready to go. No, we treat them like they don't know anything. Over a period of time, we keep hammering away at that stuff, they turn out to be pretty good basketball players. And then yeah, it gets defined by that—this is the Rebecca Lobo era, '95's National Championship. Our first

All-American was Kerry Bascom, and that era [we] went from finishing last in the Big East before we got here to going to the Final Four. Then on Rebecca's team, we had Jennifer Rizzotti, National Player of the Year. We had Kara Wolters, National Player of the Year. We had Nykesha Sales, who ended up being a two-time All American here and a WNBA superstar. The Diana Taurasi era had four Olympians and multiple All-Americans and National Players of the Year. The Maya Moore era with Tina Charles and Renee Montgomery and just amazing All-Americans and great players. The Stewie [Breanna Stewart], Stefanie [Dolson], [Morgan] Tuck and Moriah Jefferson [era]. All those eras involve so many good players. Each one of those players was treated the exact same way. They were all coached the exact same way, and maybe that's why we had similar successes with every one of them, because we rarely changed the formula. I don't care if you came in with the ability of Maya or Stewie, or you came in with limited ability like some of our other players, it didn't matter. We were going

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to coach you the exact same way and we were going to get the same results. Looking back, that consistency of how we've done it is something we're proud of.

SLAM: Do you think the formula and consistency are what's contributed to the program's success?

GA: For sure. The response that we get a lot of times is, *You have the best players.* And I would think, well, we have some of the best players, but we don't have *all* the best players. If we're able to get two of the best players in the country every year, that's only two out of, say, 24 in the All-American Game. So, the other 22 went someplace [else]. So you can't just say we won because we get the best players.

But I think the consistency and the kind of players that we get, that to me is the differentiator between us and other programs. It doesn't mean that what we do is better than anybody else. It's just a little different. Again, we don't win every year. This is the part that's funny: We've gone to 22 Final Fours and those 22 Final Fours have all come since 1991. So that's in 33 years. That's pretty amazing. Twenty-two Final Fours in 33 years. That's fantasy land, OK? In 22 Final Fours, we won 11 national championships and we've lost 11 times in the Final Four. We don't win all the time. I think our goal is to just put ourselves in position to win all the time; it doesn't mean we're going to. And that's not the easiest thing in the world to do. In today's internet world, you're either the best in the country or you're the worst in the country. Nobody ever says, *Yeah, they're pretty good!* Which is sad because there are a lot of pretty good teams. But now you're either top or you're the worst. There's no in-between. That's not the real world. If you're a team or a coach or a player, you start to feel the pressure of those expectations. If you're not careful and you get caught up in that, it doesn't matter how many good players you have, you're going to have a hard time winning.

SLAM: What has been the biggest factor that's made the program click?

GA: We've heard all the time that the UConn era or the dynasty is in demise, you know, that it's—it goes back to what I said: there's this perception that if you're not winning national championships, you're not very good. I just think that, what makes it click, especially in today's world, is that you don't allow yourself to be caught up in all that stuff as a player. You don't become [caught up in the] internet and what people are saying about you. You keep recruiting players that are more selfless than they are selfish. [Players] that are willing to give up a little bit of themselves in order to win a championship and to play with other terrific players. There's a lot of players that want to go to a school where they're going to be the center of attention and it's going to be all about them. What makes it click for us, and why people would talk about us the way they do is because we do find players that want to sacrifice some of their own goals for the big goal, the team goal. That's a little bit rarer today than it was when I started.

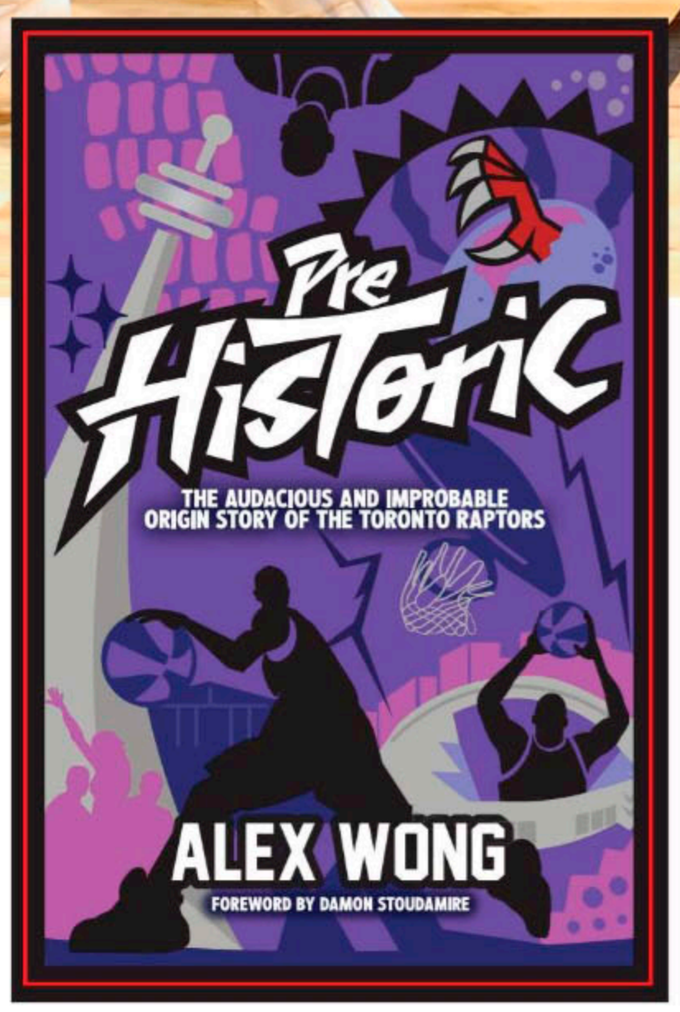
SLAM: Have you thought of your legacy?

GA: I've thought about it during those times, when, maybe at the end of the season, you just finished a very difficult season. Maybe you're celebrating a championship or you're disappointed in how the season ended, and you wonder, *Do I have it in me to keep doing this?* How much is taken out of you to accomplish all these things. And you look back and you see the things that have happened here—I don't know that I think of it in terms of who's coming after me or what am I leaving behind, but I think some of the things that we're going to leave behind are probably undoable in the future. I don't think anybody can sit here and say, OK, pick out a coach that you think is going to win 11 national championships that's coaching today. You'd be hard-pressed. Pick a team that won 111 in a row. Pick one that won 90 in a row, three times... Name a program that's going to go to 14 straight Final Fours. Things that we've done legacy-wise are going to be undoable now. That's probably not a bad thing because that means that the game has grown so much that it's going to be more difficult to accomplish any of those things. Players are going to more schools than ever before, different schools. Coaches are doing a phenomenal job of not just recruiting, but of coaching. The legacy that's going to be left here by those people that have worked here and played here, some things—we're going to be in the record books for eternity. That's something to be proud of, from myself to be proud of, which I am, all the coaches that have ever coached with me and every single player that put on a uniform here at UConn over those 39 years. It's their legacy, too. S

IN LIVING COLOUR

WRITER ALEX WONG TELLS THE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF ONE OF CANADA'S FIRST NBA FRANCHISES IN HIS NEW BOOK, *PREHISTORIC: THE AUDACIOUS AND IMPROBABLE ORIGIN STORY OF THE TORONTO RAPTORS*. IN THIS EXCERPT, HE EXPLAINS HOW THE TEAM'S FAMED DANCE PAK CAME TO BE.

WORDS ALEX WONG



WHEN THE TORONTO RAPTORS JOINED THE NBA AS AN expansion franchise in 1995, they were not just bringing pro basketball back to the city for the first time since the Huskies' ill-fated one-year run in 1946, but they were creating opportunities for many people in the city to become part of a brand-new hoops community.

Toronto was always known for its multiculturalism, and it would shine through in how many parts of the Raptors organization were formed in the very beginning. There was no better reflection of this than the story of how the franchise's first in-arena dance team was formed.

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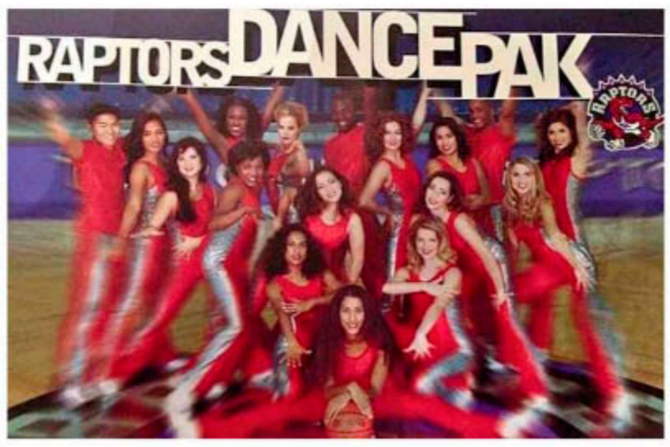

Before the start of the 1995–96 season, Tamara Mose was a 21-year-old working retail at Gentlemen's Court at Eaton Centre and as a go-go dancer at Phoenix nightclub. The Guelph, Ontario, native took ballet lessons growing up, discovered jazz dance and hip-hop as a teenager, and had flown to Los Angeles and auditioned to be part of The Fly Girls dancing troupe on the popular Fox sketch-comedy show *In Living Color*. After beating over 500 dancers for the role, Mose started rehearsing with the dance crew and even taped a few episodes on set when she received news her visa application had been rejected. Mose moved back to Toronto.

"I was dating someone. He was a designer and had submitted a bunch of logo ideas to the Raptors," she recalls. "The team sent him a letter and told him they weren't accepting unsolicited designs. I started thinking, 'Wait a second. They're gonna need some kind of a dance team, and this is something I can do.' So I put together a reel of my *In Living Color* clips and a résumé and mailed it to them." Mose landed an interview with Cooper [Brian Cooper, who ran Raptors game operations at the time], who hired her to be the coordinator and choreographer of the dance team.

When it came time to brainstorm a name for the squad, Mose wanted something hip and related to the team's nickname. She kept coming back to how raptors traveled in packs. The "Dance Pack" sounded perfect. But something wasn't right. After thinking about it for a few more days, Mose realized the name needed more of an urban feel. So the Dance Pak was born.

Over 400 applicants arrived at the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel in downtown Toronto for an audition to be part of the Dance Pak. Mose wanted the team to reflect the diversity of the city. She also wanted to hire both men and women. The Dance Pak wasn't going to be a bunch of cheerleaders who wore skimpy clothing and waved pom poms during timeouts, an idea that had become in vogue in the NBA in the late 1970s when Los Angeles Lakers Jerry Buss introduced the Laker Girls. They were going to be live-event entertainers with expertise in dance.

Vanessa Cobham, an 18-year-old with jazz and hip-hop dance experience, remembers walking into the Westin Harbour listening to Blackstreet on her Walkman. She lived in Ajax, Ontario, and had begged her mother to drive her to the audition. "I had never seen anything like it," Cobham recalls. "I grew up in a small town, and now I get there, and there are hundreds and hundreds of girls." As one of the 50 dancers who made the first cut, she was invited to the Randolph Academy for the Performing Arts for a second tryout. After another impressive audition, Cobham was one of 20 people hired to be part of the Dance Pak.

As a high schooler, Cobham rode the GO Train three times a week to rehearsals. She would tell her classmates about being part of a pro basketball team's dance team, but no one believed her until one of her teachers saw Cobham on television during a Raptors game. The SkyDome also became a place for the Dance Pak to finish their schoolwork. "In between our performances," Cobham recalls, "I would be doing my calculus homework."

One of three men on the team, Chris Medina, was studying at the University of Toronto at the time and would do his schoolwork on the subway to the game. In between in-game performances, he would take 15-minute power naps. "I would go to the closet and sleep," Medina recalls. "They would knock on the door and say, 'It's time to go perform,' and I would wake up and perform."

Mose helped liven up the atmosphere at the SkyDome in the first year with various dance routines. The team would dance to Michael Jackson one night, salsa dance another, and occasionally entertain the home fans with a disco set. Mose worked with music composer Orin Isaacs to create several original dance numbers. Popular dances, including the Tootsee Roll, the Robocop, and the Roger Rabbit, became part of the routine.

Mose says it took time for the audience to learn the rhythms of the in-game entertainment. "We had to teach fans how to react at certain points of the game," she says. "We would have to get them hyped up in the fourth quarter. We'd stand and clap. We used to call it 'the 20-minute workout.' It was cardio for us."

The team didn't have a substantial wardrobe budget, so Mose took a do-it-yourself approach. She worked with her designer boyfriend to create daring costumes for the Dance Pak, including an outfit that featured a white dress shirt, and purple unitards, with a fedora to match. Mose helped pick out colorful wigs for the dancers and landed sponsorship deals to get everyone a pair of Nike sneakers and an Indian Motorcycle leather jacket to wear during games. The most memorable costume remains a set of red mechanic suits that the Dance Pak wore regularly. "That's going to go down in history," Mose says. "It was the easiest to put on because it was loose. It didn't matter what body shape you had. We could do any dance move without worrying about anything showing."

The Dance Pak was a transformative experience for many of the members professionally. They would go on to land other gigs in the entertainment industry. Mose made it a point to hire a diverse group of dancers. "It was something I wanted to put forward in terms of a legacy for the dance team," she explains. "I've always thought about diversity and inclusion, including how much the dancers were paid. I did a lot of research and made sure the pay was comparable to the top end of what other NBA teams were paying. I also wanted to make sure we had gender equality and that the team was representative of Toronto. That was important to me."

One of several Filipino dancers hired by Mose was Alma de Jesus, who was born in the Philippines and immigrated to Canada in 1975. Growing up in a predominantly White neighborhood in Hamilton, Ontario, de Jesus was bullied at school and called racial slurs by the other kids. When her father demanded that the principal punish her daughter's classmates, the school decided against any discipline. It made de Jesus grow up thinking what made her different was something she shouldn't be proud of. De Jesus would find joy in dancing, paying for her own classes in high school, and traveling downtown for jazz classes while she studied psychology at McMaster University. After landing a role with the Dance Pak, de Jesus discovered a new Filipino-Canadian community within the dance crew. It included Madonna Gimotea, a Scarborough, Ontario, native who had competed in rhythmic gymnastics at the 1992 Summer Olympics. The two became close friends, and salsa danced through every Latin club in the city. They were joined by another Dance Pak member, Theresa Runstedtler, who grew up with her Filipino mother and German-Canadian father in Kitchener, Ontario. "They were people I didn't have to explain my experience to," Runstedtler says of her friendship with de Jesus and Gimotea. "We just understood certain things about each other."

The Dance Pak was personally rewarding for dancers around the city to come together with a group of like-minded people. "Tamara gave people from different cultural backgrounds an opportunity to share their love for dance and showcase their talent," Medina says. "The color of your skin didn't matter. What mattered was your heart, spirit, and ambition for dancing."

"Where would young Canadians go and practice dancing hip-hop back in those days? Where would you go to get paid to do that and be able to perform with the best dancers in the city? You went to the Dance Pak," Runstedtler adds. "Where did somebody who did not fit the ideal, White, typical blond, skinny girl type go to find community? This was one of those places. You didn't have to be this rigid ideal of this skinny, White body. You could be a different body shape. You could be muscular. You could be curvy. And you would still be considered a good dancer." S

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***Alex Wong is a writer based in Toronto. He has written about basketball and culture for* SLAM, *as well as* The New Yorker, GQ, The New York Times *and The Atlantic. He is the author of* Cover Story: The NBA and Modern Basketball as Told Through Its Most Iconic Magazine Covers. *He co-authored the Canadian bestseller* We The Champs: The Toronto Raptors' Historic Run to the 2019 NBA Title.**

NO LIMIT

Class of 2024 star **Vyctorius Miller** is ready to remind people just how good he is on the court—and how high he's capable of rising.

WORDS **RYAN JONES**
PORTRAIT **ATIBA JEFFERSON**

ON THE COURT, Vyctorius "VJ" Miller thrives at assessing his options and making the right choices based on what's in front of him. It's a skill that's proving useful for him off the court as well.

When we spoke by phone in early November, Miller was in the process of finalizing a decision on where he'd play his senior year of high school ball. He starred at Crean Lutheran (CA) High as a sophomore, then transferred to AZ Compass Prep, where he showed out as a junior last season. The Southern California native was expected to be back at Crean Lutheran for his final season, but at press time, he was still weighing his options—including a possible return to Compass Prep.

Wherever he finally ends up this winter, Miller will take his place as one of the top prospects in the class of 2024. And that brings us to his other big pending decision. When we spoke in November, the 6-5, 180-pound combo guard had officially narrowed the options for his post-high school destination to Gonzaga, LSU, Oregon, USC and G League Ignite. Whether in college or the G League, Miller will be a difference maker from day one.

Of that choice, he says, "I'm definitely wide open. Wherever I go will be somewhere I can play as a freshman, and where the coaching staff will embrace me."

Any coaching staff in its right mind will be happy to welcome Miller, who has used his length, vision, versatility and athleticism to confirm a spot as a national top-50 recruit in the '24 class. Asked to assess his strengths, he says, "I definitely think of myself as a point guard, so I'd say my passing ability, plus I'm a three-level scorer and I can score at will. I'm also just a good person to be around." As far as areas of improvement, he's still working on making the jump from solid defender to "lockdown defender, because I know that's what keeps you on the court."

Genetics helped get Miller on the court in the first place, as hoop talent runs in the family. His dad, Vyshonn Miller, better known as '90s No Limit Records standout Silkk the Shocker, was a solid hooper back in the day, while his uncle Percy "Master P" Miller, famously got an NBA tryout not long after he built No Limit into a southern rap dynasty. He's also seen cousins Romeo, Hercy and Mercy Miller climb the prep hoops ladder and make it to the college ranks, so he understands better than most the challenges and opportunities in front of him.

Whatever advantages he might have enjoyed given his famous family, Miller comes off like a dude who's focused on earning his spot—and leaving no doubt that he deserves it. "Not gonna lie, I feel like I've been more locked in this year than ever," he says. "I'm starting to have that feeling like a chip on my shoulder again, because I'm one of those guys that's gotta show people who I am." Asked to clarify—does he feel like he simply needs to remind people how good he is, or that he's still trying to prove he even belongs among the best prospects in the country?—Miller is blunt. "It's definitely the first one," he says. "People know I'm like that, but not necessarily day in and day out."

He'll have his chance to remind them soon enough. Although he didn't yet have his senior-year destination nailed down when we spoke—presumably that'll be confirmed by the time you read this—Miller did have a short, clear list of goals to check off before he wraps a stellar high school career. "I'm definitely trying to be an All-American, and just dominate, really," he says. "That, and just try to become a better person on and off the court." S

MAJOR BUSINESS

Coming from a prominent basketball family, University of Michigan commit **Syla Swords'** passion for the game and readiness for the next level is crystal clear.

WORDS **HABEN FESSEHAZION**
PORTRAIT **MARCUS STEVENS**

HAILING FROM Sudbury, Ontario, Canadian sensation Syla Swords is one of the newest additions to Michigan's 2024-25 roster. With family ties in the game, basketball has always been a part of the 6-0, 17-year-old forward's DNA. The Swords family is synonymous with Canadian basketball, and even after leaving Canada for the Big Apple, Syla knows where home is.

"Every time I get on the floor, I know I'm representing a country, even now in high school and [playing] American ball. I'm still known as the Canadian guard... [I'm] representing something bigger than [myself]," she says.

Swords' parents, Shelley and Shawn, played basketball at Laurentian University in Ontario, with Shawn continuing to play professionally until he was offered a spot as Laurentian University's head coach.

Swords credits her parents for introducing both her and her younger sister, Savannah, to basketball early on. "Going to my dad's practices—that was the way he would babysit us," she says.

Though Swords recognizes that her family had a huge impact on her passion for basketball, her love for the game was something she developed on her own. "It's a passion and it's not like it's not a job, which is something [my parents have] been really keen on putting into our minds," she continues. "When we finally got the chance to join our first team, it was a no-brainer. Our role models were basketball players."

After verbally committing to Michigan last May, she's keeping her eyes on the prize, which right now means leading her Long Island Lutheran basketball team to the top of the rankings.

After her father was offered a position as the associate head coach for the Long Island Nets in August, the Swords family packed up and headed to New York, where the sisters started hooping at Long Island Lutheran High School. "We had no idea about anything New York City coming in from a small town in Northern Ontario," she says.

Though her end goal has always been following in her father's footsteps by representing Canada in the Olympics, Syla's immediate goals are slightly more representative of your ordinary high school senior. "I'm planning on majoring in business [at Michigan]...so I'm just finishing up my essays right now to submit next week," she says. "That's been number one on my list."

When she's not hooping or working on her Common App, you can find Swords crushing the competition (her family) in games of Catan during family game nights. Because at the end of the day, it's always been about family. As she enters her last season of playing high school basketball with her sister, Swords reflects on the importance of having family on her side on the court.

"It's been amazing having a built-in best friend, a built-in training partner," Syla says. "I always say we're each other's biggest competitors, but we're also each other's biggest supporters."

Until her debut at Michigan, Swords is working on taking her game to the next level by becoming more shifty, establishing herself quickly on her first step and improving her reads of the defense. When speaking about any concerns for her collegiate career and beyond, Swords knows it won't be easy. But Ontario's very own is no stranger to change.

"Of course, I'm going to fail at different things," she says, "but I'm just excited to get myself into that environment."

One of Swords role models is Seattle Storm point guard and fellow Canadian, Kia Nurse. "She's where I want to be in the next 10-15 years. Just growing up, watching her do what she's done for Team Canada, it's been really fun. Hopefully I can follow her path." **S**

THE ROCK
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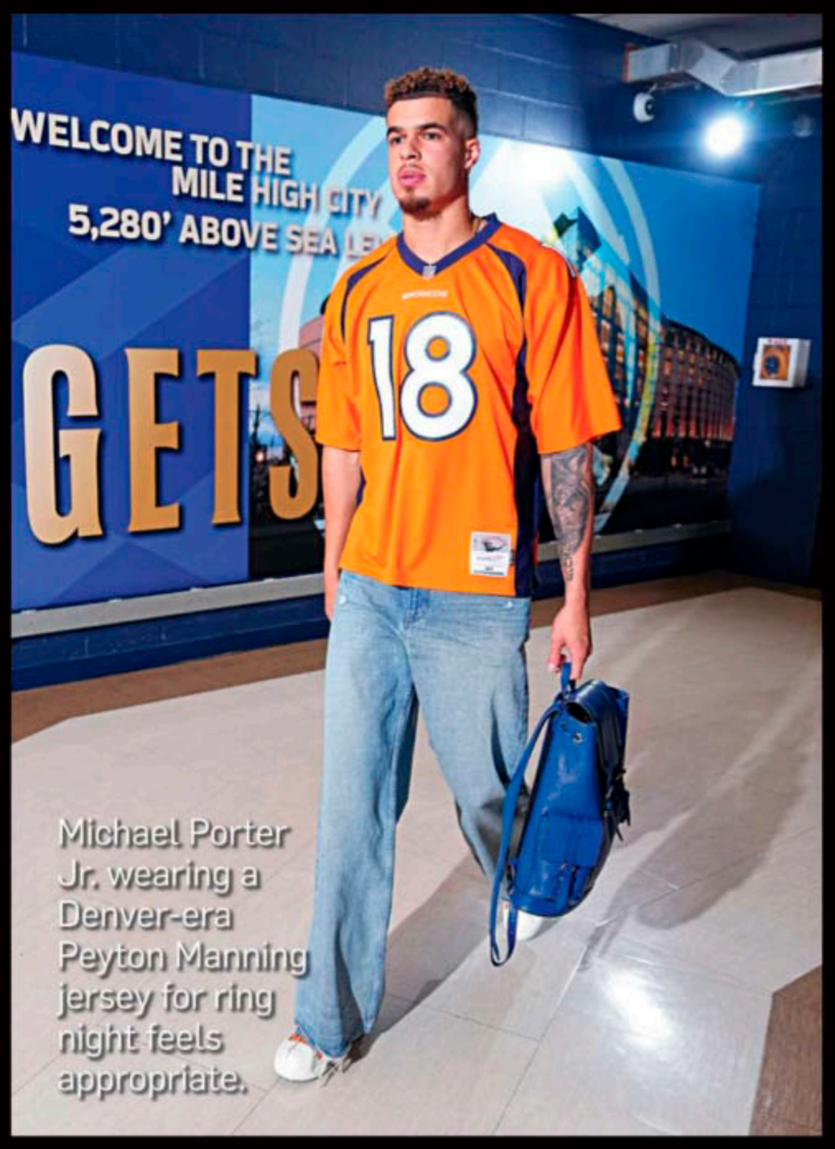
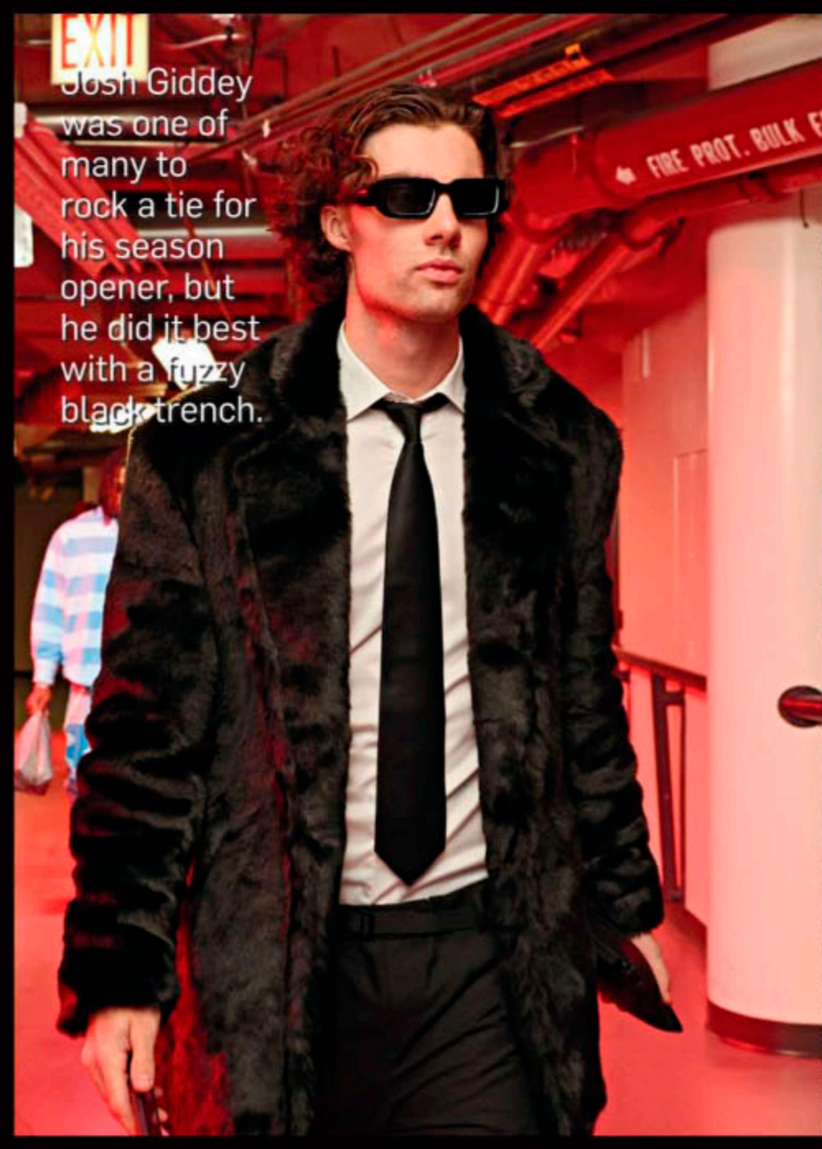
LEAGUE FITS

The NBA is back. Finally.

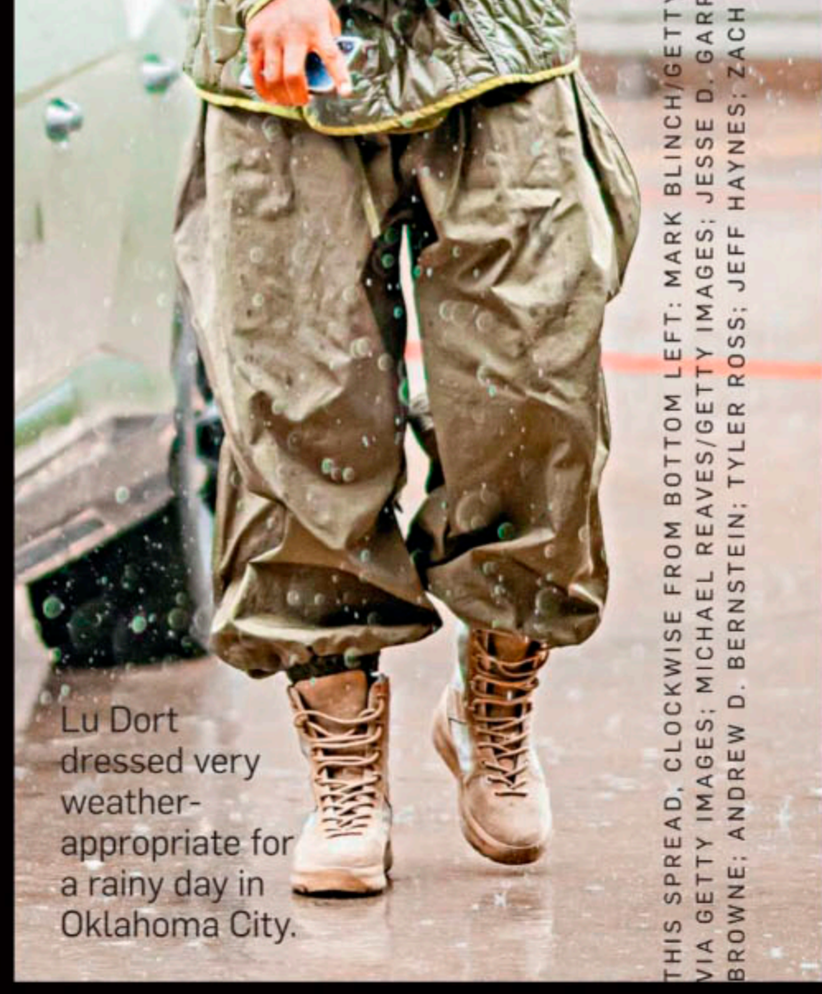
Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was giving shades of Magic Johnson at the Thunder's season opener.



Michael Porter Jr. wearing a Denver-era Peyton Manning jersey for ring night feels appropriate.



Josh Giddey was one of many to rock a tie for his season opener, but he did it best with a fuzzy black trench.



Lu Dort dressed very weather-appropriate for a rainy day in Oklahoma City.

P.J. Tucker kept it solid for his return to Toronto, the city his NBA career began in.

Devin Booker knows that the key for a cozy hoodie is extra long sleeves.

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: MARK BLINCH/GETTY IMAGES; GARY DINEEN; GARRETT ELLWOOD/BOTH NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; JESSE D. GARRABRANT; PEPPER ROBINSON; KENNY GIARLA; CAMERON BROWNE; ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN; TYLER ROSS; JEFF HAYNES; ZACH BEEKER; BARRY GOSSAGE/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

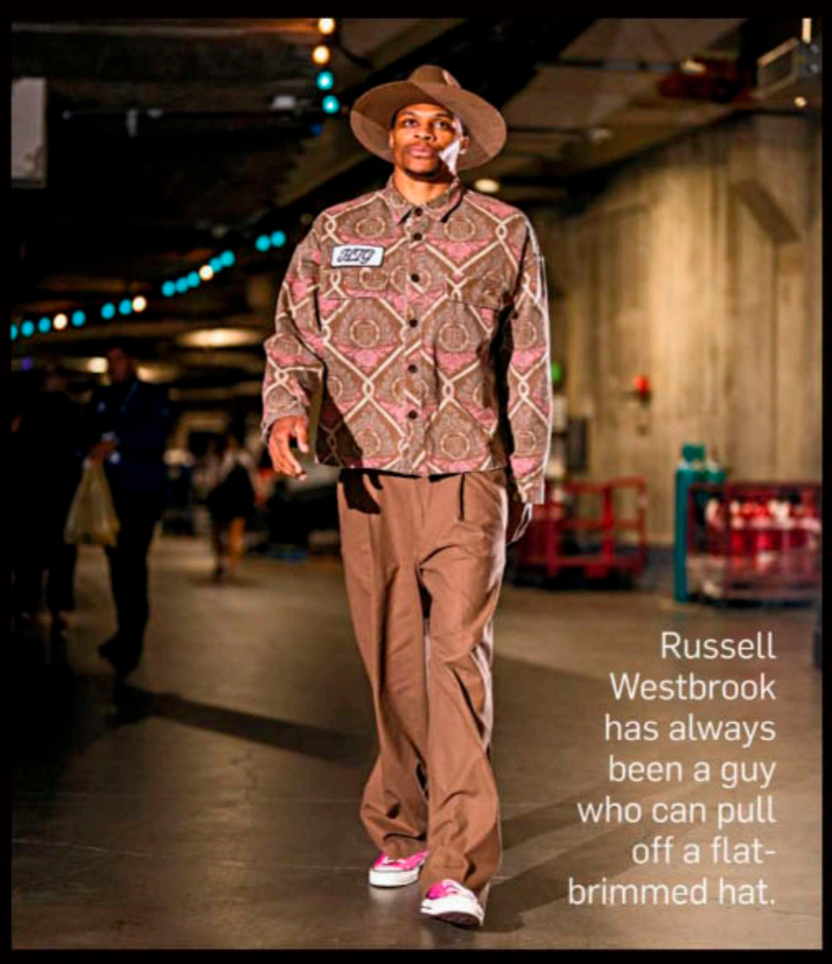
Tobias Harris in one of the more bold trench coats you'll see this season.

It's already trench coat season in Indiana for Tyrese Haliburton.

Jerami Grant has gotta spend more at Dover Street Market than any other player in the NBA.

Torrey Craig is already paying homage to Dennis Rodman a few days into his Bulls tenure.

Kyle Kuzma put on a masterclass in layering for the Wizards' first home game of the year.



Russell Westbrook has always been a guy who can pull off a flat-brimmed hat.

Grant Williams might be experimenting a bit more now that he's teamed up with hoop stylist Sydney Bordonaro.

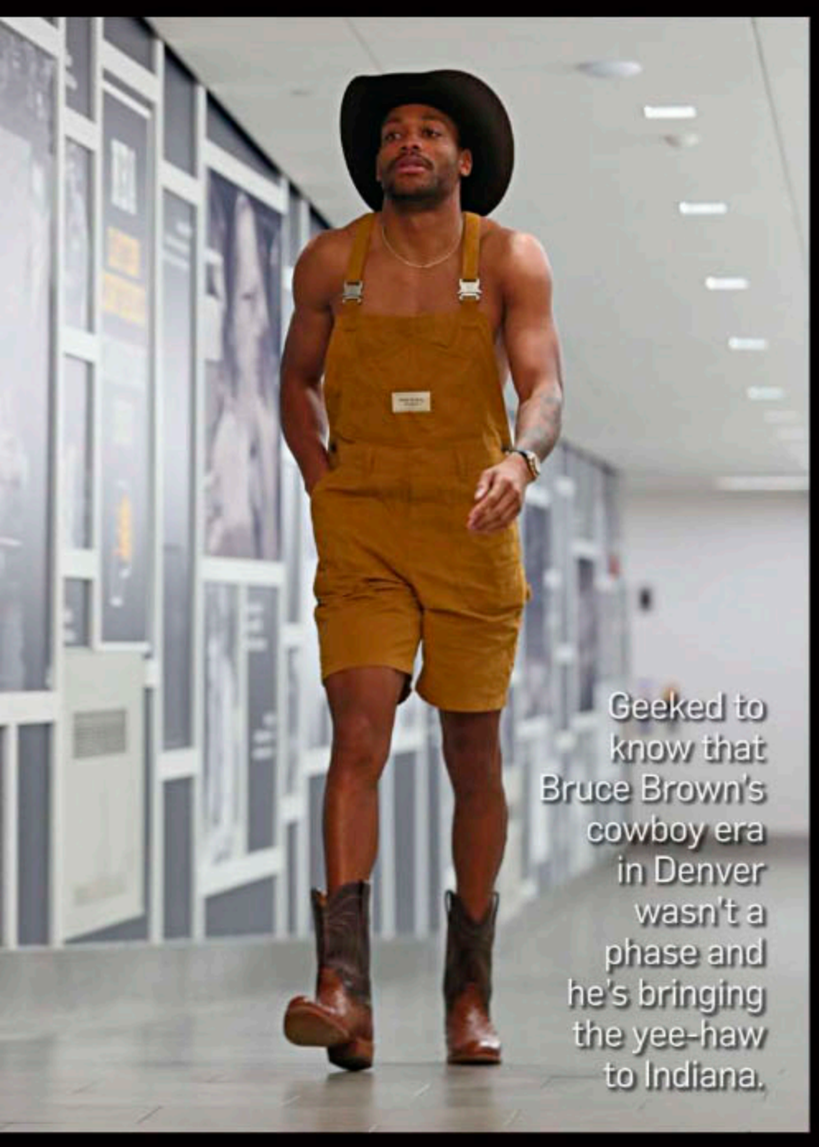
LeBron James wore Pharrell's first collection for Louis Vuitton at the first game of the season.

The event might've called for formal wear, and Devin Booker managed to do it while still rocking a hoodie.

Kyle Kuzma was styled by Teyana Taylor in runway – Amiri for the Wizards' opener.

LEAGUE FITS

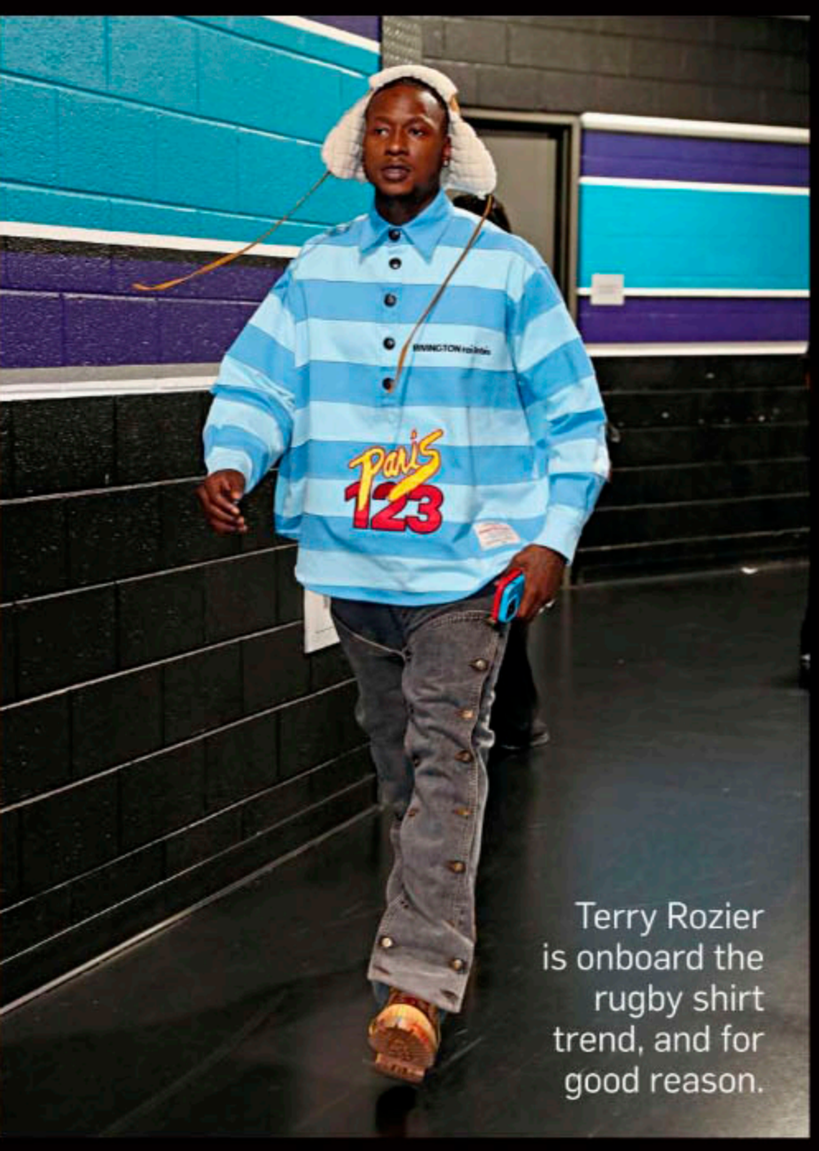
The NBA is back. Finally.



Geeked to know that Bruce Brown's cowboy era in Denver wasn't a phase and he's bringing the yee-haw to Indiana.

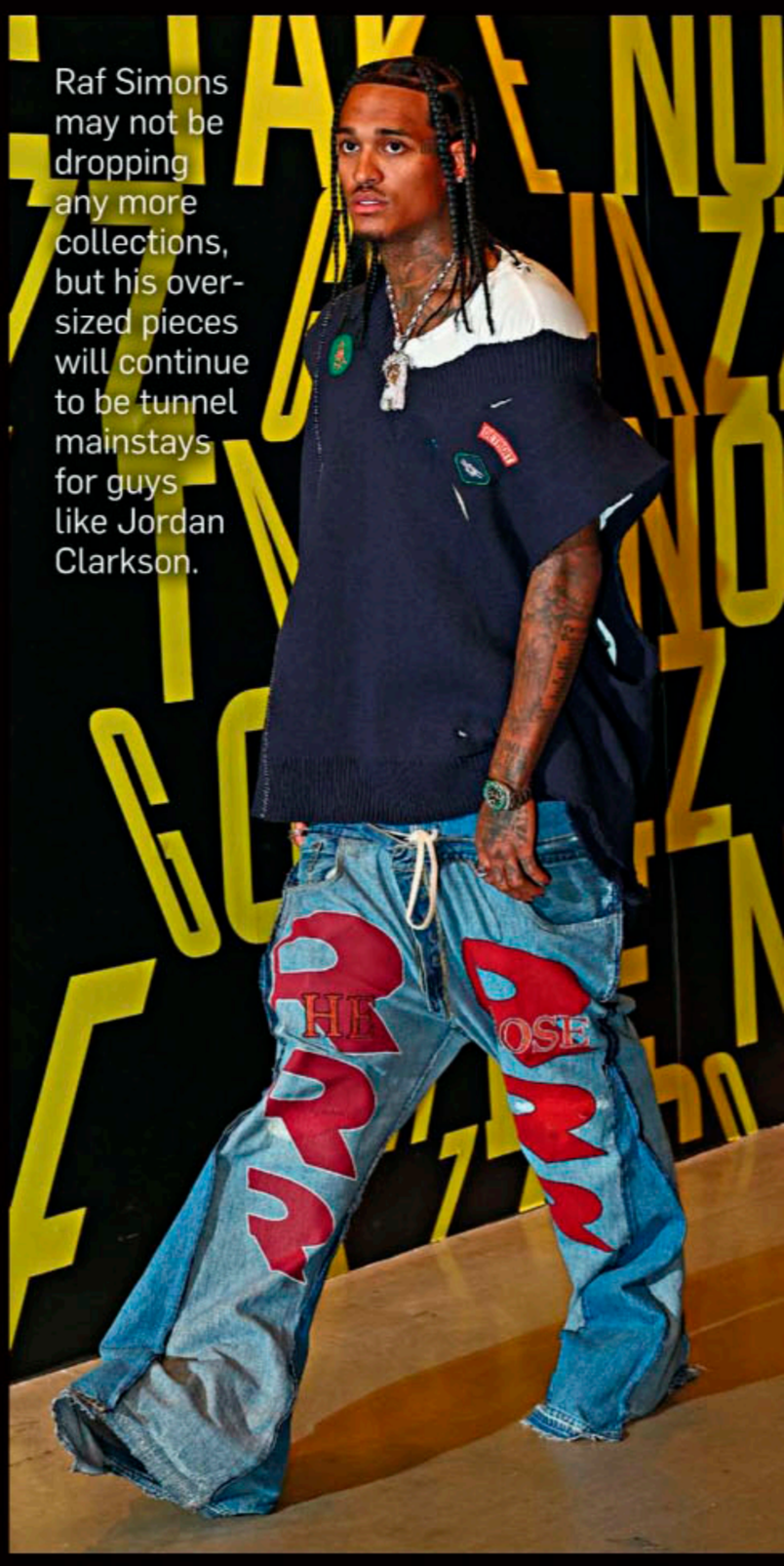
You're a wizard, Alperen Sengun.

I don't know if Collin Sexton's all-green look qualifies as monochromatic, but it came across as effortless.

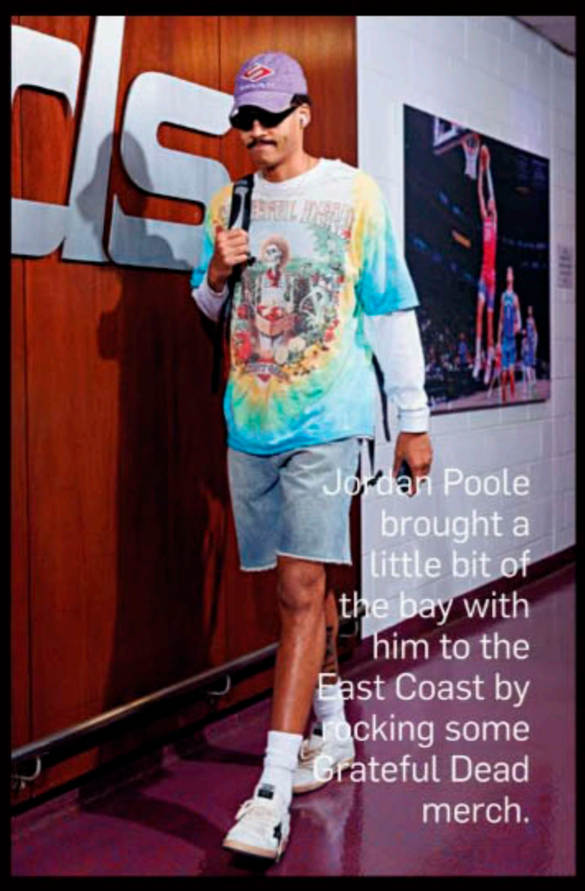


Terry Rozier is onboard the rugby shirt trend, and for good reason.

We're going to appropriately label the color of Jeremy Sochan's top as "Polish Mustard."

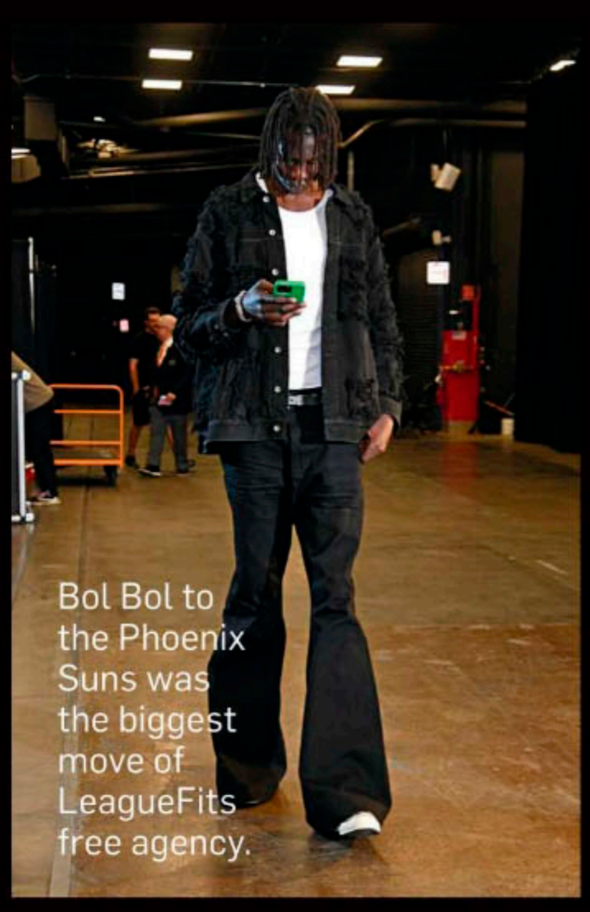


Raf Simons may not be dropping any more collections, but his over-sized pieces will continue to be tunnel mainstays for guys like Jordan Clarkson.



Jordan Poole brought a little bit of the bay with him to the East Coast by rocking some Grateful Dead merch.

I could see leather blazers like Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's becoming commonplace in the tunnels.



Bol Bol to the Phoenix Suns was the biggest move of LeagueFits free agency.

Jalen Williams is fully in his rockstar era.

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: PEPPER ROBINSON; GARRETT ELLWOOD; NOAH GRAHAM; JEFF HAYNES; KENT SMITH; TYLER ROSS; MELISSA MAJCHRZAK; ZACH BEEKER/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES; KENNY GIARLA; BARRY GOSSAGE; MELISSA MAJCHRZAK; LOGAN RIELY/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

KICKS

CURRY 11 "FUTURE CURRY"
Out now *$160*

REEBOK ANSWER III
Out now, *$140*

AIR JORDAN XI "NEAPOLITAN"
Out now, *$225*

NIKE AIR PENNY 1
December 2, *$180*

WHERE DO I COP?

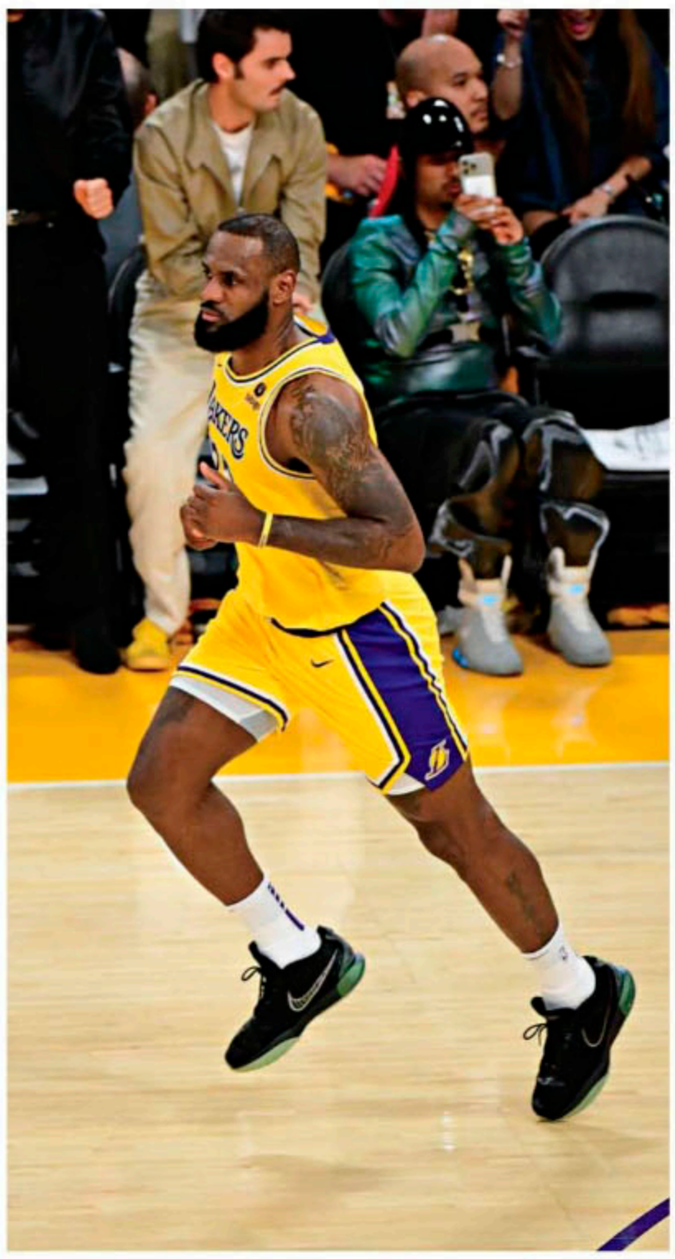
PRESENTED BY LEAGUEFITS

Once a week, LeagueFits' 11 favorite looks and where to buy them,

STRAIGHT TO YOUR INBOX

The King's Treasure

If you dive deep into the design of the **Nike LeBron 21**, you'll uncover its true inspirations.



PEARLS LIE NOT ON the seashore. A dive is required to find the prize. Time is necessary. And nothing is guaranteed. Some oysters don't contain any. But some do. Some hold the secret of precious beauty. Only after journeying into the unknown can the mystery be revealed.

There is mystery under the water. There is mystery above the water, too, even far away from the water. Parenthood is a mystery. Nothing is guaranteed.

LeBron James found himself a pearl through diving into parenthood. His daughter Zhuri is the precious treasure that he guards as if he were an oyster.

Zhuri, along with the idea of an oyster hiding a pearl, serve as the inspirations for the Nike LeBron 21. Longtime lead LeBron designer Jason Petrie worked together with the King to develop the idea of protection as the main theme of the 21s. With that knowledge in mind, oysters and pearls begin to visibly break through the design language of the latest silhouette for No. 23.

Like those pearls hidden deep under the water, the 21 has a pearl detailing that hides under the outsole. The center of the outsole is carved out to reveal the shank plate that helps with torsional rigidity. And what's on the shank plate? A pearl design.

The 21's overall design is playing off the pearl idea, too. Materials have varied from colorway to colorway, but the heel is uniform—its lines are shaped like an oyster.

Functionally, the 21 has Zoom Air units in both the forefoot and the heel. But there is a difference from the front of the sneaker to the back of it. The Cushlon carrier foams have different densities from heel to forefoot, meaning that there is firmer foam in the heel and softer foam in the forefoot. Each heel strike in the 21 contains a progression from the firmer foam to the softer foam.

Colorways of the 21 have also been related to different pearls and oysters. Nike has so far revealed the "Abalone," the "Tahitian," the "Freshwater," the "Akoya" and the "Dragon Pearl" editions. Other colorways currently lay hidden. Let's dive into the unknown to find more.***—Max Resetar***

Warp Speed

With the **Curry 11**, Stephen Curry keeps growing.

STEPHEN CURRY IS never done. Four titles, two MVPs and a spot on the NBA's 75th anniversary team isn't enough. He's been adding layer after layer to his game for years.

He's never done evolving his sneaker line either. The nine-time All-Star is now up to the Curry 11. Like the 8, 9 and 10, the 11 sits on a foundation of Flow tech. This year's model has a dual density Flow setup, a midfoot shank under the hood for added stability and a Pebax plate in the forefoot. Up top, the 11's upper is made of Warp, a material designed to effectively be seatbelts for the foot.

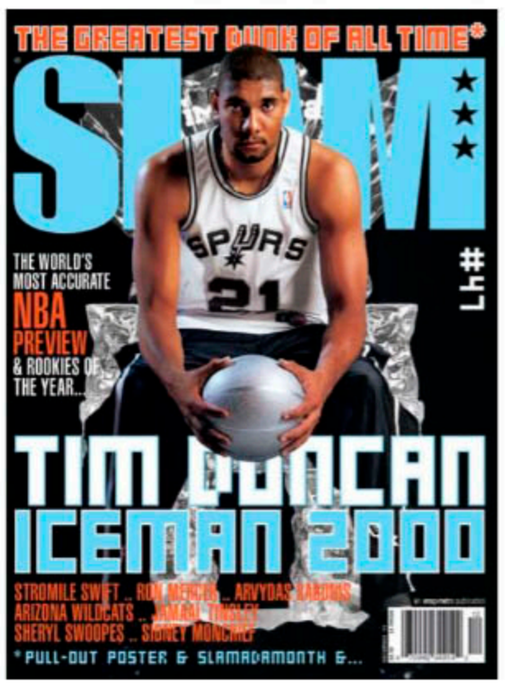
The rest will be up to the man who wears No. 30. He's gonna be out there adding even more to this game while playing in the Curry 11.—***MR***

@SLAMARCHIVE

SLAM 47
December 2000

THREE YEARS AFTER he landed in Texas, Tim Duncan became a household name. He'd found a perfect fit in the winning culture of the Spurs, humbly taking on the position of protégé to the great David Robinson. Not only had TD collected ROY honors, but he'd also landed on the NBA First Team, become a staple at All-Star Weekend and won a title with a Finals MVP cherry on top. When he took a seat on an ice chair for SLAM 47's homage to George Gervin, we were presented with an image to articulate what we already knew: Timmy D was cold.

No. 1 pick Victor Wembanyama has us on board the hype train for sure. Not only did he join a franchise that specializes in producing elite players who win titles, but he also possesses the physical and skill



attributes of what the NBA has been evolving into for the past 20 years. Wemby is the fulfillment of basketball prophecy. Not that I'm getting carried away or anything...—***Sammy Gunnell***

LEFT PAGE FROM LEFT: GARRETT ELLWOOD; ADAM PANTOZZI/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF CURRY

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4. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS	2,308	2,142
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18. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner
Susan Price Thomas, Managing Editor 11/1/23

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Frozen Moment

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER **OCTOBER 10, 2023**

MARCUS STEVENS

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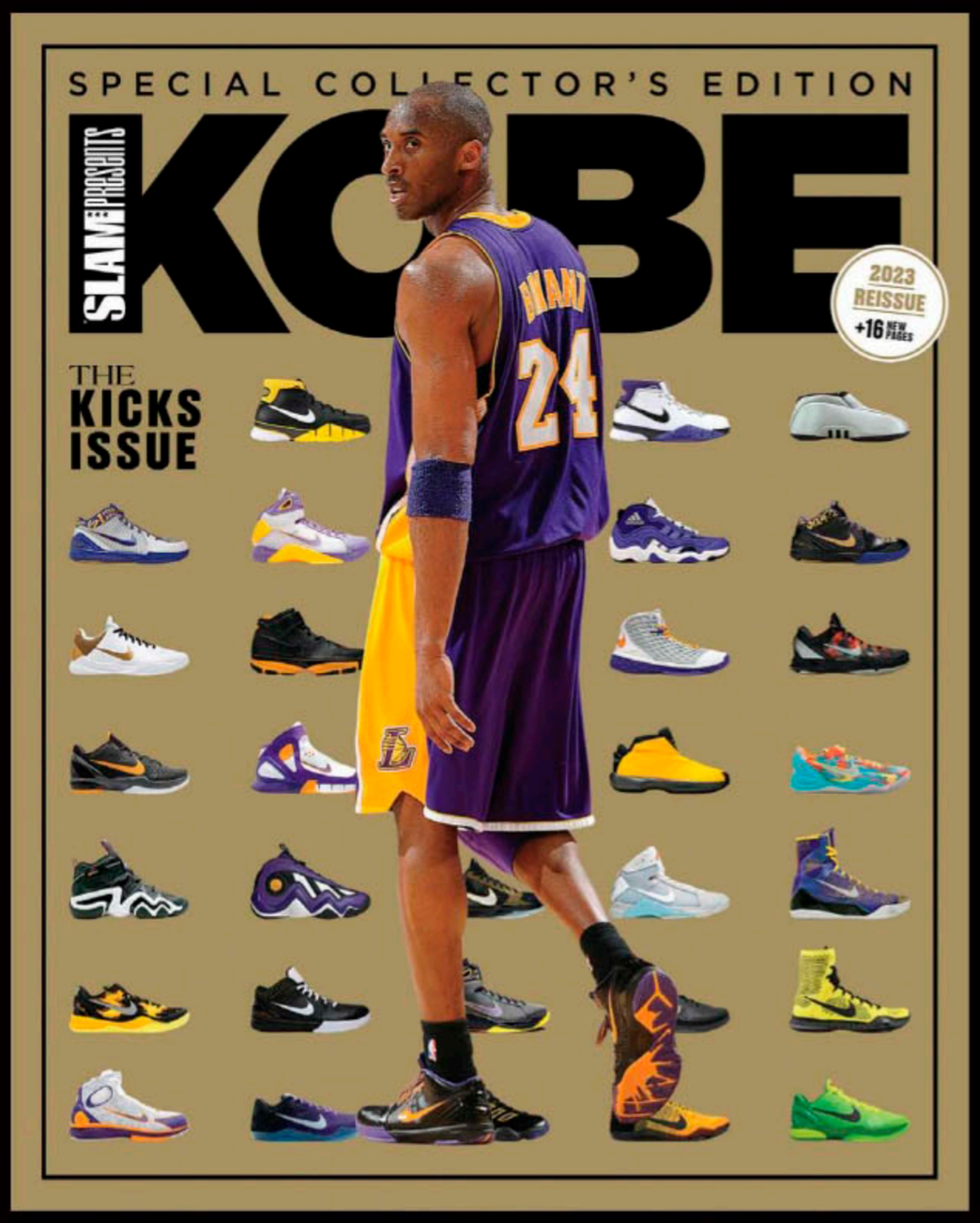

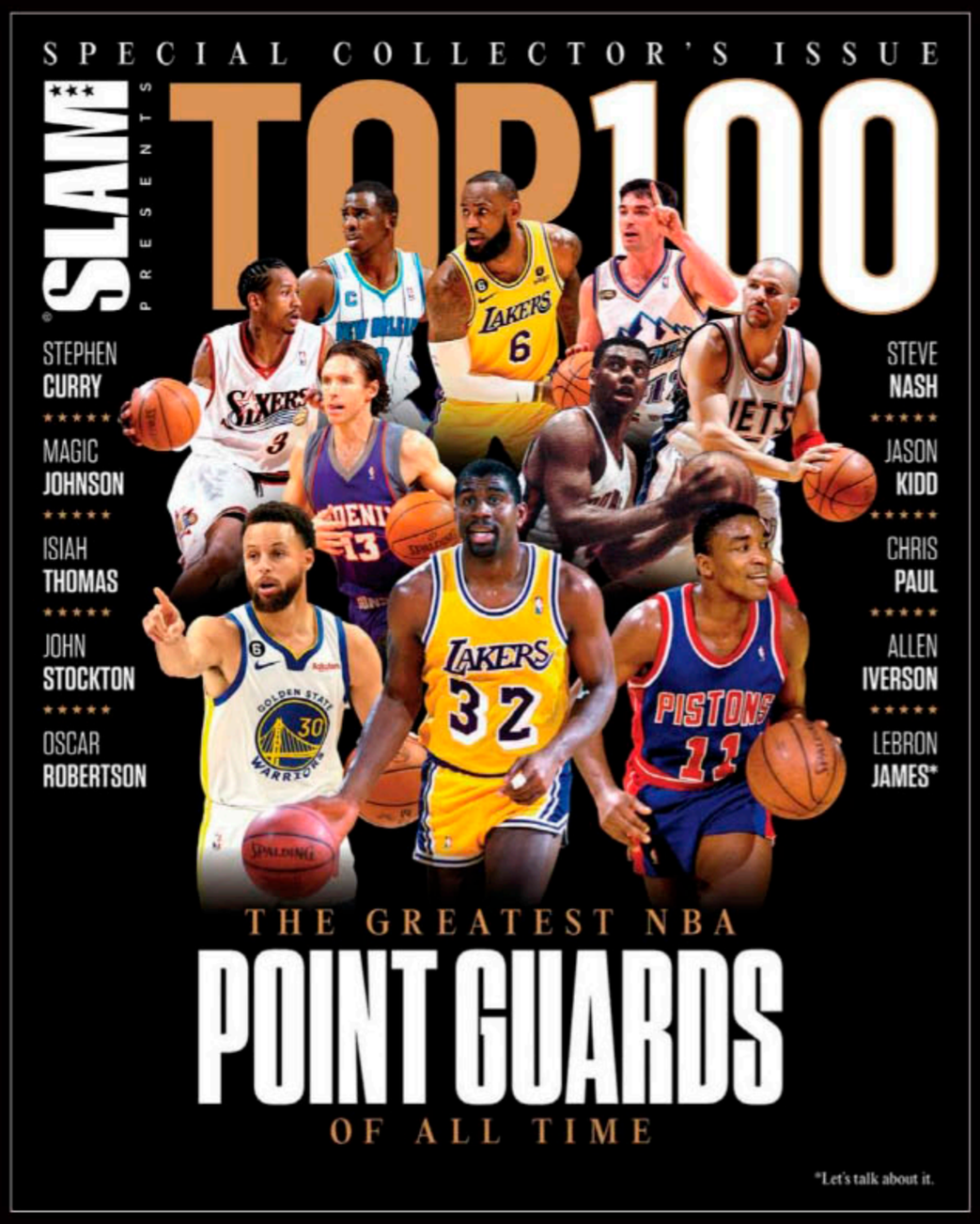

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